

SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE

SF, Fantasy, & Horror's Monthly Trade Journal

DNA PUBLICATIONS, INC.
ma

From E-books to E-warehouses

**Naked Prose:
Authors Without Covers**

**Oh Shatner,
My Shatner!**

**Jeff Rovin's
SF Cinema**

**Harry Potter
Convention Report**

**Lots and Lots of
Book Reviews**

February/March 2006

Issue 265

\$5.95/\$6.95 Canada

Fiction from
Absolute Magnitude

Chris Bunch

Stephen Dedman

Jo Walton

Denise Lopes-Heald

Brooks Peck

James Keenan



PUBLISHER AND EDITOR IN CHIEF
Warren Lapine

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER
Angela Kessler

NEWS EDITOR
Ian Randal Struck

BOOK REVIEWER
Don D'Amassa

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Tanya Brown, Frederik Pohl, Jeff
Rovin, Marvin Kaye, John Deakins,
and Don D'Amassa

Science Fiction Chronicle is published monthly by DNA Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988. Send all news information to *Chronicle*, Ian Randal Struck, 1380 East 17th St., Ste 210, Brooklyn, NY 11230 or chronicle@dnapublications.com; Website <www.dnapublications.com/sfc>. Printed in USA.

Entire contents copyright © 2005 by DNA Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages and reprinting of news, columns, and photos, are reserved. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher. All rights in letters sent to *Chronicle* or its editor will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and copyright purposes and subject to *Chronicle's* unrestricted right to edit and comment upon editorially. To make sure submissions are returned, include return postage. *Chronicle* is available in microform from UMI; contact them at (800) 521-0600, (734) 973-7007, <www.umi.com> for information.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

USA: 1 year (12 issues) \$45 Bulk rate;

2 years (24 issues) \$80 Bulk rate.

All payments to DNA Publications, P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988, USA.

REVIEW COPIES

Send copies of all books, audios, etc., to both Don D'Amassa (323 Dodge St, East Providence RI 02914) for review and to *Chronicle* (P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988) for listing and cover scans.

ADVERTISING

For display ad rates & specifications, contact Warren Lapine at DNA Publications, (540) 639-4288.

RETAIL DISTRIBUTION

SFC is distributed by Curtis Circulation. Contact DNA Publications for full details about carrying it in your store.

ABOUT THE COVER
WWW.NASA.GOV

The Sombrero Galaxy in Infrared Light

PHOTO CREDITS

CHRONICLE

SF, Fantasy, & Horror's Monthly Trade Journal
Issue #266 / February/March 2006 / Volume 28, Number 2 / ISSN 0195-5365

News Headlines

4: From E-books to E-warehouses; Interest in E-books Expanding; Naked Prose: Authors Without Covers. 9: SFWA Nebulations; Southern Lights. 10: Universal Monsters Updated and Booked; Oh Shatner, My Shatner!

News Notes

13: Publishers; Authors; Books. 14: Magazines; Manga/Graphic Novels. 17: Market Reports. Bookselling; Bookseller Catalogs & Websites. 18: Publications received. Author Readings & Signings. 19: Awards; Award Nominations; Contests. 20: Exhibits; Stage & Radio; Education; Organizations & Conferences. 21: Film & Television; Web Sites; 22: Discussions Groups; Science Fiction Becoming Science Fact; Other Stuff. 23: Corrections.

Authors & Editors

23: Personnel; Activities; Media Sales. 24: Short Fiction Sales; Book & Novel Sale. 25: Books Re-Sold; Authors Make Their Deadlines; Foreign Rights. Republication

Don D'Amassa's Critical Mass Book Reviews

Jeff Rovin's SF Cinema

Editorial: Things are Changing by Warren Lapine

Letters

Obituaries

Lumos 2005 The Witching Hour by Jessica Ahearn

Fiction from **Absolute Magnitude**:

Down to The Tethys Sea by Stephen Dedman

This Sporting Life by Chris Bunch

Hard Time by Denise Lopes Heald

The Bus Driver by James Keenan

Down to Earth by Jo Walton

The Valiant/Allison Incident by Brooks Peck

Advertisers Index

Baen Books	5, 7, 73, 79
Bantam	11, 15
Black Library	2
DNA Publications	12
Spyre Books	34
Wilder Publications	16, 75, 77
Tor Books	80

HEADLINES

From E-books to E-warehouses

HarperCollins is planning to build a "digital warehouse that mirrors the one in the physical world," according to President Brian Murray, in order to store its own digital content. This move will give HC greater control over the digital use of its books. Currently, online companies such as Amazon and Google make their own digital copies of HC's books, which gives them ownership of those files. Now HC will create their own master digital database, storing the digital files on its servers and give other companies the right to index those files.

Murray said the company currently has about 3,500 digital copies of its books, but those are in its production database and are unsuitable for web use or sale.

CEO Jane Friedman said that HC "couldn't sit back and wait for something to happen to us. We need to protect our rights and the rights of our authors. This is a logical move on our part," referring to the upsurge in digital publishing by companies outside the industry.

At the moment, HC is not addressing the question of how it plans to make money on the initiative. "Today's focus is not on how we can monetize these files," Murray said, although he did note that HC might develop a plan to sell its content itself. "We've been frustrated that Amazon and Google could move faster than us to develop new business models," he said. While he's not sure how the sale of book material will develop, the creation of the digital warehouse "makes us better prepared to respond to business opportunities."

HC will hire an outside company to build the database, Murray hopes that, in cooperation with other publishers and vendors, the publishing industry will be able to develop one standard for digital files. HC's project will put more than 20,000 titles from all of its subsidiaries into the database; they expect to have the first files up by mid-year.

Interest in E-books Expanding

Publishers Weekly reports that the surprising thing about the best-selling e-books of 2005 is that they're an unsurprising lot of books. The list is published by the International Digital Publishing Forum (www.idpf.org). "Unlike past e-book bestseller lists that had been dominated by science fiction titles, this year's list sees the inclusion of mainstream bestsellers along with a dictionary (*Merriam Webster's Collegiate* ranked #8), the *Holy Bible* (#9) and even uber-hits like Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (#27). Other additions to the list"—from Susan Miller's astrology guide *The Year Ahead* (#15) to J.W. McKenna's romance *Office Slave* (#23, published by Renaissance eBooks)—"highlight the fact that more women are reading e-books as well."

They go on to note that the list hasn't completely dropped its science fictional roots: George Lucas' screenplay for *Star Wars* Episode III was the top seller on the list, four of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide* books were in the top 30, and Greg Bear also put two in the top 30.

Nick Bogarty, Executive Director of the IDPF, introduced the list, saying "Never have we seen such diversity in our annual e-book bestseller list. Bestselling romance titles, independently published e-books and reference combined with the electronic versions of the major print hits of '05 show that e-books are coming into the mainstream of the reading public."

The International Digital Publishing Forum's copyrighted top 10 best selling e-books of 2005 are:

1. *Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith* by George Lucas (Del Rey)

2. *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (Doubleday)
3. *Angels & Demons* by Dan Brown (Pocket)
4. *State of Fear* by Michael Crichton (HarperCollins)
5. *Digital Fortress* by Dan Brown (St. Martin's)
6. *Embers Falling on Dry Grass* by Robert Jordan (Simon & Schuster)
7. *Deception Point* by Dan Brown (Pocket)
8. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition (Merriam-Webster)
9. *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Zondervan)
10. *The Narrows* by Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)

Other genre titles making the top 30 include: *Alien Infection* by Darrell Bain (Double Dragon) at #13; *Raising Atlantis* by Thomas Greanias (Pocket, #14); *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams (Rosetta, #16); *Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear (Del Rey, #17); *Darwin's Children* by Greg Bear (Del Rey, #18); *Winterfair Gifts* by Lois McMaster Bujold (Fictionwise.com, #19); *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* by Douglas Adams (Rosetta, #22); *Life, the Universe and Everything* by Douglas Adams (Rosetta, #24); and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* by Douglas Adams (Rosetta, #25).

Naked Prose: Authors Without Covers



Author Sephera Giron and Performance artist/poet Rain Graves; photo by Jack Cargil

New York's Merchantile Grill hosted the group in a private second floor

room. Authors David Berreby, Jack Cargil, Sephera Giron, and Ann Tonsor Zeddies, read *au naturel* during the cocktail hour, and then joined the group for dinner after the reading.

Berreby read a section on nudity from his nonfiction *Us and Them* (published by Little, Brown); Cargil read from his historical novel, *Mercenary of the Gods* (Regina Books); Giron from her horror novel *Mistress of the*



Author Ann Tonsor Zeddies; photo by Jack Cargil

Continued on page 9

CRITICAL MASS

by Don D'Ammassa

Hardcovers

***Music to My Sorrow* by Mercedes Lackey and Rosemary Edgill, Baen, 12/05, \$26, ISBN 1-4165-0917-8**

The Bedlam's Bard series continues, set in a version of our world where the border between reality and myth has become porous. The protagonist has had problems in the past with mad elves and other enemies and he thinks it's time he had a rest. There wouldn't be much of a story if he was right, though, so now he has to deal with a kind of psychic vampire. This series is much lighter than most of the novels either of these collaborators generally write on their own, but they provide a nice break from the overly long, overly serious fantasy epics that dominate the book shelves lately.

***Princess of Wands* by John Ringo, Baen, 2005, \$25, ISBN 1-4165-1399-X**

The urban housewife as warrior against supernatural evil has a long and honored tradition. Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber is the obvious example, and there have been similar books with varying emphases since – including Graham Joyce's brooding *Dark Sister* and Esther Friesner's amusing *Hooray for Hollywood*. John Ringo, best known for his military SF, tries his hand in his latest novel, pitting suburbia against demons. It falls somewhere between the extremes, with elements of humor, adventure, and mystery all tossed in together. Happily, the mix comes out very well indeed, and this is easily the book I've liked best from this author.

***Song of Ireland* by Juliette Osborne-McKnight, Forge, 5/06, \$24.95, ISBN 0-7653-3124-3**

I've seen references to at least one other book by this author which takes Irish legends and reshapes or retells them, but this is the first I've actually read. It's set during the Celtic invasion

and settlement of that land, and their first encounter with the little people, the basis for leprechauns, a magical other race who lived there quietly until outsiders made that impossible. The story concentrates on both the clashes between the two civilizations and the common elements that they share, and the bad things that happen are generally more tragic than villainous. If you haven't overdosed on Celtic fantasy, you should give this one a try because it's intelligently thought through and packed with interesting characters and situations.

***Knife of Dreams* by Robert Jordan, Tor, 10/05, \$29.95, ISBN 0-312-87307-7**

Robert Jordan has yet to write a bad book but I have to admit that I think the *Wheel of Time* series has overstayed its welcome and needs to be brought to a close. Once again there are signs that the final confrontation between good and evil is at hand, but once again that defining moment is deferred as we skip from one to another of several divergent story lines, each working circuitously toward the presumed conclusion. This is the eleventh book in a series that I believe was supposed to end at ten, and there's enough subplots to support additional volumes. Jordan runs the risk of defining himself as a one track train although I suppose his loyal fans will view things differently.

***In the Eye of Heaven* by David Keck, Tor, 4/06, \$25.95, ISBN 0-7653-3132-0**

***A Shadow in Summer* by Daniel Abraham, Tor, 3/06, \$24.95, ISBN 0-7653-3134-5**

Both of these are debut fantasy novels from Tor, but I suspect that they will appeal to somewhat different audience. I had a very uneven reaction to this first fantasy novel by Keck. On the one hand, it made use of a popular fantasy protagonist, the young man out to find his place in the world, and that's still an appealing story if handled well. On the other hand, the

world he's searching through is pretty much the same as most other fantasy worlds, and you could probably describe it reasonably accurately just by looking at the cover. There are some very entertaining incidents as the plot progresses, but the main plot itself offers very little new or interesting. I was also bothered by the author's tendency to use lots of very short sentences in close proximity, which I found choppy and distracting. Not a bad book, but not a notably good one. The Abraham novel is a very different story, no pun intended. The prose is more entertaining and flows more smoothly, and it is used to tell a much more compelling story. Although this fantasy world bears a lot of similarities to those of other writers, Abraham has some interesting idiosyncrasies in his world that make it seem fresher, and his characters act and interact in a far more complex and realistic manner. It is also surprisingly unmelodramatic given the dramatic events which take place within it. This appears to be the first of a four novel trilogy, so I'll be looking forward to the next.

***The Golden Hills of Westria* by Diana L. Paxson, Tor, 2/06, \$24.95, ISBN 0-7653-3089-4**

It's been a while since Diana Paxson has added to her chronicles of Westria, but she's back with the eighth volume here. The heir to the throne of Westria is something of a disappointment to his father, but that doesn't make the king any less upset when the boy is kidnapped and sold into slavery. Rescue efforts aren't made any easier by the turmoil outside the borders, most of it caused by an army of religious zealots trying to seize control of the world. One of the best parts of this one is the relationship between the prince and a childhood friend, and of course it doesn't hurt that Paxson has become a progressively better

Continued on page 28



SF CINEMA

by Jeff Rovin



Benicio del Toro

Benicio del Toro will star in the remake of *The Wolf Man*. The actor, who is a collector of Wolf Man memorabilia, wants the film to be true to the original. It will be set in Victorian England, with Del Toro playing a man who returns from America to his ancestral home, is bitten by a werewolf, and becomes one himself. Andrew Kevin Walker (*Seven*) is writing the script. The film will be released in the summer of 2008.

Sequels to *Batman Begins* and the \$185 million *Superman Returns* (opening June 30) are coming, with directors Christopher Nolan and Bryan Singer returning, along with respective stars Christian Bale and Brandon Routh. The *Batman* film will open in 2008, *Superman* in 2009. Singer is set to direct a new screen version of *Logan's Run* this fall. Jonah Nolan (brother-of-Chrisopher) is writing the *Batman* screenplay. Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man*) will direct *The Wee Free Men*, a live-action adaptation of Terry Pratchett's young-adult novel, as soon as he finishes the third installment of the web-slinger's adventures, which began shooting in January. The novel, part of the Disc World series, is about a young farm girl who goes to a parallel world to save a brother abducted by an evil fairy queen. She battles various monsters with the help of 6-inch-tall blue-faced sprites who wear kilts, speak in thick Scottish brogues and frequently misbehave.

Meanwhile, Raimi and partner Robert Tapert (*Xena*) have hired Michael Gordon to write the screenplay for their upcoming horror flick *Siren*, based on the topselling Japanese videogame. In the film, an American medical school student searching for her missing sister in Japan ends up in the remote mountain village of Hanuda where

she confronts a terrible evil that can no longer be contained.

Finally on the Raimi front, *Spider-Man 3* has added to its cast. Theresa Russell has joined as Mrs. Marko, the wife of Flint Marko, a.k.a. the Sandman (Thomas Haden Church). James Cromwell has also signed on as Captain Stacy, the father of Gwen Stacy (Bryce Dallas Howard), Peter Parker's new love interest.

Madonna, David Bowie, and Snoop Dogg are providing voices for the live-action/CGI animated film *Arthur and the Minimoys*. It's based on the children's book by Luc Besson, who is directing. The story is about ten year old Arthur (Freddie



Brandon Routh

Highmore) who tries to save the home of his grandmother (Mia Farrow) with a treasure his grandfather possessed in the land of the tiny title creatures.

Ron Friedman and Steve Bencich, who scripted Disney's animated *Chicken Little*, are writing the live-action family comedy *The Missing Link* for Disney. It's being described as a monkey spy adventure.

Scary Movie 4 opens on April 14 and targets *War of the Worlds*, *Saw*, *The Grudge*, Oprah, and Dr. Phil.

Marvel Studios is preparing *Hulk 2* and is talking to David Duchovny about playing Bruce Banner. The company's motorcycle-demon *Ghost Rider* movie has

been pushed from this summer to February, 2007 to avoid the crush of big budget films.

If your taste runs to twenty-five foot-long killer crocodiles stalking South Africa, director Michael Katleman is making *Primeval* which will star Dominic Purcell and Orlando Jones. The script is from John Brancato and Michael Ferris (*T3*). Matthew Vaughn has written and will direct the film version of Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*. In it, a young man (Charlie Cox) must get a falling star named Yvaine (Claire Danes) to please his beloved (Sienna Miller). So doing, he must battle Captain Shakespeare (Robert De Niro) and a witch (Michelle Pfeiffer).

Wayne Kramer (*The Cooler*) has written and will direct *Evilseek* for the Weinstein Company. Thomas Jane is set to star as a police officer who, distraught by his failure to catch a serial killer, takes his life. Satan takes over the lawman's body and continues to hunt.

Robert Nelson Jacobs is rewriting *The Banshee and Fin Magee* for Walt Disney Pictures. He is working with Dean DeBlois (*Lilo & Stitch*), who will produce and direct the live-action feature about a little boy who is ignored and pretends to be a

Continued on page 33



Christian Bale

HEADLINES

Headlines Continued from page 4

Dark (Leisure Books); and *Zeddies* from her science fiction/romance *Blood and Roses* (Phobos).

As the event was held on Veteran's Day, a group of Marines was having a Marine Corps Birthday Party on the third floor of the restaurant. Ordovery says "we were aware of them; they were aware of us. Around 10, as both parties were breaking up, the Marines came down one flight, and we opened the door and called them in. We sang Happy Birthday and the Marine Corps Anthem, and then Sherry, Sandy, and Sylvia gave all the guys big naked hugs. They thanked us for the appreciation and left a little red-faced."

SFWA Nebulations

News from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America of their annual Nebula Awards. The Nebula Awards Weekend will be held 4-7 May at the Tempe Mission Palms in Tempe, Arizona. Connie Willis will be the toastmaster at the banquet/awards ceremony Saturday night. Registration (including the banquet) is \$110 through 31 March (registration for the weekend excluding the banquet is \$35 through 31 March). Hotel reservations (room rate is \$137 per night) can be had by calling 800-547-8705. More details on the weekend are available at www.sfwaweb.org/awards/2006.

The SFWA Board of Directors has announced that Harlan Ellison will be named Grand Master. Ellison made his first sale, "Glowworm," to *Infinite Science Fiction* in 1956. Since then, he's won nine Hugo Awards, three Nebula Awards, two World Fantasy Awards (including one for life achievement), six Bram Stoker Awards (including one for life achievement), and two Edgar Awards (from the Mystery Writers of America). He's also well-known as an editor and anthologist, putting together the ground-breaking *Dangerous Visions*. He was one of the founders of SFWA and served as its first vice president.

At the same time, they announced that William F. Nolan will be named Author Emeritus at the same ceremony. Nolan was born in 1928 and sold his first fiction in 1954. He has written science fiction, fantasy, horror, westerns, and mysteries. Among his best-known novels are the *Logan's Run* series.

Jack Williamson has resigned from the Nebula Rules Committee; James Patrick Kelly has replaced him. Chairman Jeffrey Carver and member Connie Willis remain the other two-thirds of the committee.

The Nebula Preliminary Ballot has been released. From these stories, which garnered ten recommendations over the past year, the members will choose the top five in each category for the final ballot, and then the winners. The nominees are:

- **Novels:** *The Hallowed Hunt* by Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos); *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury); *Survival* (Species Imperative 1) by Julie E. Czerneda (DAW); *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean* by Jack Dann (William Morrow); *Camouflage* by Joe Haldeman (Analog, Ace); *Mortal Love* by Elizabeth Hand (William Morrow); *The Child Goddess* by Louise Marley (Ace); *Polaris* by Jack McDevitt (Ace); *Cusp* by Robert A. Metzger (Ace); *Iron Council* by China Miéville (Del Rey); *Going Postal* by Terry Pratchett (HarperCollins); *Forty Signs of Rain* by Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam Spectra); *Air* by Geoff Ryman (St. Martin's Press); *Trash, Sex, Magic* by Jennifer Stevenson (Small Beer Press); and *Dread Empire's Fall: The Sundering* by Walter Jon Williams (Harper Torch).

- **Novellas** (all five nominees make the final ballot): "The Tribes of Bela" by Albert Cowdrey (F&SF, August 2004); "Magic for Beginners"

by Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*, Small Beer Press, July 2005); "Identity Theft" by Robert J. Sawyer (*Down these Dark Spaceways*, Science Fiction Book Club, May 2005); "Clay's Pride" by Bud Sparhawk (Analog, July/August 2004); and "Left of the Dial" by Paul Witcover (*SciFiction*, September 2004).

- **Novellettes:** "Flat Diane" by Daniel Abraham (F&SF, October/November 2004); "The People of Sand and Slag" by Paolo Bacigalupi (F&SF, February 2004); "Harvest Moon" by William Barton (Asimov's, September 2005); "The Ocean of the Blind" by James L. Cambias (F&SF, April 2004); "Anda's Game" by Cory Doctorow (Salon.com, 15 November 2004); "Nirvana High" by Eileen Gunn and Leslie What (*Stable Strategies and Others*, Tachyon Press, September 2004); "Men are Trouble" by Jim Kelly (Asimov's, June 2004); "Keyboard Practice Consisting of an Aria with Diverse Variations for the Harpsichord with Two Manuals" by John G. McDaid (F&SF, January 2005); "Strength Alone" by Paul Melko (Asimov's, December 2004); and "Dragon's Eye" by Beth Shope (*Lords of Swords*, Pitch-Black Books, December 2004).

- **Short Stories:** "Rough Draft" by Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta (Analog, January/February 2005); "The End of the World as We Know It" by Dale Bailey (F&SF, October/November 2004); "There's a Hole in the City" by Richard Bowes (SciFiction, June 2005); "I Live With You" by Carol Emshwiller (F&SF, March 2005); "Still Life with Boobs" by Anne Harris (Talebones, Summer 2005); "Small Moments in Time" by John G. Henry (Analog, December 2004); "My Mother, Dancing" by Nancy Kress (Asimov's, June 2004); "Super Goat Man" by Jonathan Lethem (New Yorker, 5 April 2004); "The Faery Handbag" by Kelly Link (*The Faery Reel: Tales From the Twilight Realm*, Viking Press, August 2004); "A Princess of Earth" by Mike Resnick (Asimov's, December 2004); "Cold Fires" by M. Rickert (F&SF, October/November 2004); "Start the Clock" by Benjamin Rosenbaum (F&SF, August 2004); "The Sky's the Limit" by Lawrence M. Schoen (*All Star Zepplin Adventure Stories*, Wheatland Press, November 2004); "Glinky" by Ray Vukcevich (F&SF, June 2004); "Christus Destitutus" by Bud Webster (*Crossroads: Tales of the Southern Literary Fantastic*, Tor, August 2004); and "Born-Again" by K.D. Wentworth (F&SF, May 2005).

- **Scripts** (both nominees make the final ballot): *The Old Negro Space Program* by Andy Bobrow; and *Serenity* by Joss Whedon.

- **Audre Norton Award** (the jury may add up to three nominees): "Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie" by Holly Black (Simon & Schuster).

Southern Lights

The finalists for the Aurealis Awards were recently announced. The Australian version of the Hugos will be awarded 25 February at the Queensland Conservatorium in Brisbane. After the ceremony, there'll be a cocktail party celebrating the tenth anniversary of the awards (for more information, email director@aurealisawards.com or phone 07-3236-2750). The nominees are:

Science Fiction Novel: *Designated Targets* by John Birmingham (Macmillan); *Eclipse* by KA Bedford (Edge); *Crash Deluxe* by Marianne de Pierres (Orbit); and *Geodesica* by Sean Williams and Shane Dix (HarperCollins).

Science Fiction Short Story: "The Interminable Sufferings of Mysterious Mr. Woo" by Rjurik Davidson (*Aurealis*); "Skein Dogs" by Leanne Frahm (*Fables and Reflections*); "Slow and Ache" by Trent

HEADLINES

Jameson (*Aurealis*); "The Memory of Breathing" by Lyn Triffitt (*ASIM*); and "Terning the Weel" by Kim Westwood (*Aurealis*).

Fantasy Novel: *Darkwitch Rising: The Troy Game Book 3* by Sara Douglass (HarperCollins); *Nightpeople* by Anthony Eaton (UQP); *Surrender* by Sonya Hartnett (Penguin); *Blade of Fortriu: Book II The Bridee Chronicles* by Juliet Marillier (Pan Macmillan Australia); and *The Innocent Mage: Kingmaker Kingbreaker Book I* by Karen Miller (HarperCollins).

Fantasy Short Story: "Heart of Saturday Night" by Adam Browne (*Lenax Avenue Ezine*); "Ones and Zeros" by Terry Darnall (*Neverary*); "The Red Priest's Homecoming" by Dirk Flinthart (*ASIM*); "The Greater Death of Saito Saku" by Richard Harland (*Daikajiu*); and "Once Giants Roamed the Earth" by Rosaleen Love (*The Traveling Tide and Daikajiu*).

Horror Short Story: "Paterfamilias" by Lee Battersby (*Shadowed Realms*); "Eight-Beat Bar" by Chuck McKenzie (*Aurealis*); "Doof, Doof, Doof" by Paul Haines (*Dark Animus*); "The Ride" by James Cain (*Dark Krypt*); and "Macciato Lane" by Cat Sparks (*Ticonderoga Online*).

Young Adult Novel: *Nightpeople* by Anthony Eaton (UQP); *Magic or Madness* by Justine Larbalestier (Penguin); *Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld (Penguin); and *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld (Simon & Schuster).

Young Adult Short Story: "The Red Priest's Homecoming" by Dirk Flinthart (*ASIM*) and "Nicholas Sayre and the Creature in the Case" by Garth Nix (*Across the Wall*).

Children's Long Fiction: *Little Fur: The Legend of Little Fur* by Isobel Carmody (Penguin); *Worm Story* by Morris Gleitzman (Penguin); *Sassycat: The Night of the Dead* by Richard Harland (Ornithus Books); and *Drowned Wednesday* by Garth Nix (Allen and Unwin).

Children's Short Fiction: "The Space Gypsies" by Goldie Alexander (*The School Magazine*); "Piccolo & Annabel 2: The Disastrous Party" by Stephen Axelsen (Random House); "Piccolo & Annabel 3: The Stinky Cheese Gypsies" by Stephen Axelsen (Random House); and "The Mystery of Eilean Mor" by Gary Crew & Jeremy Geddes (Lothian).

Universal Monsters Updated and Booked

DH Press is updating some of the classic monsters from Universal Pictures films and presenting them to a new generation in brand new novels. The 2006 line-up of reborn monsters includes *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *The Wolf Man*, *The Mummy*, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. The first to appear, in January, will be *Dracula: Asylum and Wolf Man: Hunter's Moon*.

Paul Witcover's *Dracula: Asylum* (\$6.99, ISBN-1-59582-018-3) takes the reader back "to Dr. Seward's Sanatorium, where Dracula was originally destroyed, in the days directly following the end of World War I. After being gone for years Dracula finds himself trapped beneath the grounds of the madhouse where his evil reaches out into the minds of the weak and insane. As death claims victim after victim, will anyone be able to stop him?"

Michael Jan Friedman's *Wolf Man: Hunter's Moon* (\$6.99, ISBN-1-59582-030-2) introduces the reader to Lawrence Talbot who, "on a vacation in Europe, has his life changed forever when he is bitten by a lycanthrope and is cursed to walk the Earth for the rest of eternity... as werewolf. In this story, Talbot is chased by a heretical cult dedicated to destroying all marked by the sign of the Wolf. But will the friends he

finds, an order whose mission is to protect the werewolves, prove to be even more dangerous?"

In March, *Scarface: The Beginning* by L.A. Banks (\$6.99, ISBN-1-59582-017-5) "dives into the life of Tony Montana before his arrival in America to see what events shaped him into the man he became and what dire choices set him on the course of madness that would lead to a ruthless conclusion in the streets of Miami."

In May comes Paul Di Filippo's *Creature from the Black Lagoon: Time's Black Lagoon* (\$6.99, ISBN-1-59582-033-7). This one is set in the future, though it starts in the era of the films. "In 1954, an expedition found what seemed to be a missing link in the evolutionary chain: an ancient, immensely powerful amphibian Creature. Scientists tried to tame it, break its will, and even change its very being with surgery and torture, but the beast rebelled, killing nearly all in its way. But was the creature truly a throwback, a freak survivor of some prehistoric era, or was it something more? Six decades later, one scientist attempts to find out, using a time machine to journey into the past. What he finds not only shatters his vision of what the Creature might be, but could change the history of the human race forever." This will be a Creature with time travel, horror, and mystery that "blends Cold War science fiction with today's cutting edge cyberpunk in a vision of what terrors still lurk in the swamp."

Dark Horse Comics set up DH Press in 2004 to focus on fiction and pop-culture based materials. This publishing deal is through the Universal Studios Consumer Products Group.

Oh Shatner, My Shatner!

William Shatner, forever *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk (though he's been doing well as *Boston Legal's* Denny Crane) recently sold his kidney stone for \$25,000. The stone was so big, Shatner said, "you'd want to wear it on your finger."

The idea for selling the stone arose after *Boston Legal* raised \$20,000 for Habitat for Humanity. Shatner is donating the money from his stone to the same organization, and he said that it's worth about half a house. "This takes organ donors to a new high, to a new low, maybe. How much is a piece of me worth?" he asked.

The sale was handled through Los Angeles-based Julien's Auctions. The buyer, GoldenPalace.com, is an online casino becoming known more for its collection of oddities (including a partially eaten cheese sandwich with the image of the Virgin Mary on it).

In other Shatner news, he may himself have become a religious icon. The First Church of Shatnerology, on the web at www.shatnerology.com, is, one hopes, built with tongue firmly in cheek. It notes that "we worship the holy essences of the most benevolent ShatnerBeing!" There are letters from the archbishop, a Shatner filmography and discography, Shatner music videos available for download, art and poetry from the faithful, and much more.

For the true believers, however, note that it all starts off with a comment from the icon himself: "Don't let the flattering name fool you. This thing roasts me, skewers me, and teases me without mercy... It's also really funny, and incredibly well put together." You've been warned.

And in yet more from the Shatner, in partnership with FullTilt Entertainment, he's launching The William Shatner DVD Club. For an annual fee of \$47.99, members of the club will receive DVDs of science fiction, fantasy, and horror films Shatner describes as "memorable and

Continued on page 13

HEADLINES

Headlines Continued from page 10

entertaining." The web site notes that subscribers "will be open to experience Sci-Fi, Horror, and Fantasy films in their purest form, appreciate the visions of filmmakers who take risks, and enjoy movies that truly represent the genre." For more information, or to sign up, see www.shatnerdvdclub.com.

NEWSNOTES

Publishers

Wizards of the Coast, a division of Hasbro, laid off about 15 employees in late November/early December. Among those let go were: Peter Archer (Director of Book Publishing), Gary Benion, Leeds Chamberlain, Mike Elliott (Director of Design and Lead Designer of Hecatomb), Joe Hauck (Vice President of Marketing), Cornelius Lee (Senior Vice President of Marketing), Michelle Lyons, Jon Rateliff, Pat Robinett, Katie Roe, Charles Ryan (Dungeons & Dragons Brand Manager), Tim Thomas, Wendy Wallace, and Teeuwyn Woodruff. WoTC's Toby Nelson said, "We would not characterize this change as major, these were selective and strategic decisions. They have been made to give Wizards added flexibility and the ability to rapidly adapt to the changing trends in the hobby game market." He was also quick to point out that WoTC is not in trouble. "Magic is still number one, and Duel Masters is exceeding expectations in Japan."

McGraw-Hill Companies cut 500 jobs and took a related charge of \$14.6 million to restructure some operations "to enhance long-term growth prospects." The announcement came the first week of January. Dell Magazines, the publishers of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* (along with the mystery titles *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*) have announced a change in their boilerplate contracts regarding electronic rights. They've been losing money on the electronic versions of the magazines, but, in consultation with their online e-zine licensees, they believe the losses could be mitigated by keeping the electronic versions available longer (currently, they maintain the same schedule as the print magazine, i.e., on sale for one month). They have therefore decided "it will be necessary to extend the on-sale time-frame to nine months. Of course, exclusive rights will remain in effect for only the first month (of the print magazine), after which all electronic rights will be non-exclusive."

Authors

Michael A. Burstein will be teaching Science Fiction and Fantasy for Grub Street, "Boston's independent creative writing center." Announcing the appointment, Grub Street Head Instructor Christopher Castellani said "We're pleased that Michael is joining us. His teaching experience

and science fiction writing background make him a valuable addition to our instructional staff. Ever since our previous science fiction and fantasy instructor left, a lot of our students have asked for us to bring back the workshop. We think Michael is an excellent choice to teach the class." Burstein will be teaching for six Mondays, from 23 January to 6 March (with a break for Presidents' Day). For more information, or to register, call Grub Street at 617-695-0075. During the day, Burstein is now a full-time Associate Editor in the Science & Health Division of Pearson Prentice Hall.

Six members of the Clarion sf writing workshop class of 1985, along with Clarion '85 instructors Joe and Gay Haldeman, held an impromptu 20th this autumn in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The mini-reunion was prompted by the fact that Geoffrey Landis is a visiting professor of astronautics at MIT. Also living in the Boston area are Geoff's wife, writer Mary Turzillo, computer guru Lenny Foner, and writer Resa Nelson. New York writers Bill Shunn and Robert Howe joined in after a short train trip.

Author Cory Doctorow, in his New Year's Day blog, discusses the coming "Age of the Conversational Artist," noting that as media change, so must the skills necessary to be a successful artist. His thesis is that during Vaudeville, the necessary skill for success was charisma over technical accomplishment. The birth of radio changed that skill set to technical skill over charisma. And now, he says, the Internet means "all entertainments are one click away," so the artist needs to grab and keep the viewers attention, which means conversation. He launches this discussion noting that Amazon is now "hosting author-blogs alongside of the sell-pages for those authors' books." For the full blog, see www.boingboing.net/2006/01/01/amazons_authorblogs.html

Updating the Lawrence Watt-Evans on-line publishing experiment during in our October issue: he reports that he has a handshake deal with a small press to publish *The Spriggan Mirror*. The book should be out in the first half of this year. At least 150 people will be getting copies of the book by virtue of having donated enough to his production of the on-line version. And, building on this success, he's planning to start *The Vondish Ambassador* on-line in July, though that plan is tentative.

Books

For all the *King Kong* tie-in books we listed in the November issue, we still missed a few. HarperKids Entertainment also released a *Coloring and Activity Book and Stickers* and a *Coloring and Activity Book and Crayons* (both 32 pages, both \$3.99).

Adam-Troy Castro reports that the first volume of his Spider-Man trilogy, *Gathering of the Sinister Six*, "will remain out of print for reasons having to do with all sorts of legal mumbo jumbo. E-Bay reports used copies for sale at up to \$150.00." He also "really wishes I could help readers who need it to complete their set, but 'tis not to be."

Lee Weinstein has edited *Wings Over Tomorrow*, published by Wildside Press, a collection of the "other" stories by Philip Francis Nowlan, creator of Buck Rogers. Buck first appeared as Anthony Rogers in the 1928 novella "Armageddon 2419 A.D.," and its 1929 sequel "Airlords of Han," both of which appeared in *Amazing Stories*. These two launched the comic strip, in which the hero was renamed Buck, which in turn launched film serials and movies, and completed eclipsed his creator's other works. *Wings Over Tomorrow* contains a foreword by Nowlan's descendants, an introduction by the editor, the original Anthony Rogers stories, the novellas "The Onslaught from Venus," "The Prince of Mars Returns," and "Space Guards," as well as



From the left: Resa Nelson, Lenny Foner, Mary A. Turzillo, Geoffrey A. Landis, Robert J. Howe, Joe Haldeman, Gay Haldeman, and William Shunn

HEADLINES

the novelette, "The Time Jumpers."

Phobos Impact's 8,000-copy first printing of *Sword of Orion: Beneath Strange Skies* Book One by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller—one of their first four Fall titles—is completely out of stock.

Mundania Press (www.mundania.com) is bringing Robert Adams' *Coming of the Horsecans* back into print. They've already released the e-book on their web site, and will be offering trade paperback and hardcover versions in April. Originally published in 1975 and selling more than 3 million copies, the book has been out of print since Adams' death in 1990. His best-known series, the Horsecans novels, are action adventures or immortal, mutant warriors set in the 26th Century of a balkanized North America.

Wesleyan University Press has recently released Samuel R. Delaney's nonfiction *About Writing: 7 Essays, 4 Letters, & 5 Interviews*, which is, as the title says, a book for writers and would-be writers who aren't able to take Delaney's class in person. The book is available in trade paperback (\$24.95; ISBN 0-8195-6716-7) and unjacketed cloth (\$65.00, ISBN 0-8195-6715-9) versions.

Wildside Press has recently released *Wings in the Night*, the fourth volume in their planned ten-volume set of *The Weird Works of Robert E. Howard*. This one collects Howard's fiction published in *Weird Tales* from July 1932 to May 1933. "These works represent literary stepping-stones to Howard's infamous Cthulhu mythos stories and his most famous character of all—Conan the Cimmerian—and ably demonstrate that each of Howard's stories improved and added to his formidable skills as a master of fantasy and adventure." It includes "Phoenix on the Sword," the historically important first Conan story.

On 5 December 2005, *The New York Times* published its list of 100 Notable Books of the Year. On the list were the following genre titles: *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro; *Beyond Black* by Hilary Mantel; and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* by J.K. Rowling.

Scholastic has announced the mass market paperback edition of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth volume in the series, will be released 25 July. It will be 672 pages long and priced at \$9.99, with an expected first printing of 2 million copies.

Magazines

SciFi.com pulled the plug on *SciFiction* at the end of 2005. Ellen Datlow had edited the award-winning on-line fiction portion of the website for its six years, during which time she won a Hugo Award for Best Editor. Content is expected to be archived for some time to come, but there are no guarantees.

Author Orson Scott Card has launched a quarterly on-line magazine, *The Intergalactic Medicine Show* debuted in October at www.intergalacticmedicineshow.com. Card promises "to keep it a PG-13 magazine and website," which he says means that while there may be "intense and adult themes, there will be no explicit or detailed sex... nor will there be language of the sort that earns an R rating."

The name of the forthcoming Baen Books online magazine (see the previous issue of *Chronicle*) has been changed to *Jim Baen's Universe: A Three-Ring Circus of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fact*. It will appear bimonthly after the June 2006 debut. See www.baensastoundingstories.com.

Eileen Gunn is shutting down her online magazine *The Infinite Matrix*, which began publication in August 2001. In an editorial entitled "Approaching Oblivion," Gunn said "The Infinite Matrix will present a final fireworks of stories, essays, and columns, and then will cease

publication. The site will stay up for a year or so, although older work may be removed as rights run out." To read it before it's gone, see www.infinitematrix.net.

Manga/Graphic Novels

Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin group of companies, has formed two new ventures. Virgin Comics will be headquartered in New York City, and has already announced its first project: an as-yet-unnamed work by John Woo (producer of the film *Bulletproof Monk*). (see also Film & Television)

Seven Seas Entertainment is launching several new graphic novel series of web comics. Among them are *Earthsong* by Lady Yates and *Inverloch* by Sarah Ellerton. *Earthsong* follows a young woman named Willow, who finds herself in a mystical world with no memory of her former life. She discovers that the residents of this world are fantastical creatures of ancient lore, and that the planet itself is alive, conscious, and in grave danger. *Inverloch* is the story of Archeron, "an innocent young pup from the horned wolf-like race known as the da'kor. After his heart is captivated by a beautiful elf, he leaves behind his peaceful existence and sets out on a quest full of danger and unexpected mystery." Look for both titles in mid-2006.

Hellboy creator Mike Mignola and artist Richard Corben have written a two-part prequel to Hellboy's debut in *Seeds of Destruction*. Debuting on 1 February, *Hellboy: Makoma or a Tale Told By a Mummy in the New York City Explorers' Club on August 16, 1993* reveals Hellboy's early encounter with the powerful mythology of Africa. Dark Horse is publishing it with a \$2.99 cover price.

Dark Horse is also announcing a change in their *Conan* series. Kurt Busiek is leaving, *Hellboy* creator Mike Mignola has written "a bizarre and haunting adaptation of Robert E. Howard's 'The Hall of the Dead,'" and then, with issue #33, Timothy Truman will take over the scripting. Cary Nord will continue as artist.

Also on 1 February, Dark Horse is also publishing a 25-cent *Star Wars* flipbook with one story on each side. *The Knights of the Old Republic* is set 4,000 years before the three most recent movies, in a time when "the Jedi Order flourishes, the Sith are at their most deadly, and the legendary Mandalorian army are on the verge of a devastating march across the galaxy." It's here that Zayne Carrick, a young Jedi with a grand destiny, takes his first steps into a larger and more dangerous world." It's backed with *Rebellion*, set just before *The Empire Strikes Back*, which gives "a glimpse into the lives of Luke Skywalker, Rebel Jorin Sol, and Imperial Officer Janek Sunber, just before the events of the new series."

On 15 March, Dark Horse will release *Book of Thoth* #1 by Len Wein, Kurt Busiek, and Kelley Jones, which tells "the horrifying origin of Thoth-Amon, Conan's greatest adversary. In the dark alleys of a decaying city, one beggar boy conjures visions of a future where, instead of spitting on him in the streets, the rich and privileged cower in fear of his terrible power. For young Thoth, hunger and pain is a way of life, twisting his heart into believing that no wickedness is too costly if it can afford a means of escape—not even the betrayal of one's sole confidant in the wretched, unfeeling world."

IDW's *The Transformers* #0 (see our October issue) became IDW's first 100,000-copy seller, and now they're planning multiple *Transformers* projects for 2006. First up is the January release of *The Transformers* #1 by writer Simon Furman and artist E.J. Su. Picking up from #0, issue one begins the first six-part storyline, "Infiltration." In February,

Continued on page 17

HEADLINES

Headlines Continued from page 14

they'll launch *Transformers: Beast Wars* #1, also written by Furman with art by Don Figueroa, which is the first part of a four-issue miniseries entitled "The Gathering." IDW notes that "it's a story years in the making, as Furman and Figueroa are finally turned loose on the Beast Wars universe. To properly demonstrate his level of excitement, issue one features four covers from Figueroa, one of which will be available as a gatefold wraparound image." Both titles will be 32-page books.

Buckaroo Banzai and the Hong Kong Cavaliers are back, and Moonstone is releasing their new adventure in April. "Return of the Screw," part 1 of 3, is a story by Mac Rauch and features the talents of Stephen Thompson, Keith Williams, Dennis Calero, Matt Haley, and Michael Stribling. As the publisher says, "Everyone's favorite adventurer/surgeon/rock star is back again just in time to save the world! Along with his Hong Kong Cavaliers, Banzai must battle more than one surprise arch enemy, each with their own motives, but all acting in concert to bring Banzai and the universe as we know it to his knees! All this sandwiched between a couple of great rock and roll guitar solos, a few surgical procedures, a crazy gun battle on land and air, Buck's one chance for the ultimate revenge, his soul in turmoil, all the chicks digging him, engineering synchronicity, pretty toilets, a human pickle, and a giant sombrero!" The 32-page book will retail for \$3.50 (\$4.50 for limited edition cover version by David Michael Beck).

Moonstone says of their *Werewolf: Call of the Wild* #1 (author: Mike Oliver; artist: Joe Bucco; 32 pages, \$2.99): "If you're going to kill a man, you best make sure his brother won't come looking for him. *Especially if that man's brother is a werewolf."

NBM's *Boneyard* #21 by Richard Moore will be appearing in March. This volume starts a new story arc, in which "it's Paris' first date with Abbey... sort of. Abbey's representing the Boneyard gang at a mandatory gala for all supernatural entities living on Earth." (\$2.95)

NBM is also publishing *Autopsycritica* by Chad Michael Ward. This is a "corrosive goth vision of life and death and in-between. Combination art book and dark narrative, it's the ferocious beauty of abysmal visions." (80 pages, color trade paperback, \$17.95, ISBN 1-56163-462-X)

In May, NBM is publishing *Lucifer's Garden of Verses Volume 3: The Student (or Nude descending a Staircase... Head First)* by Lance Took. This is the story of a down-on-his-luck artist who "enters into a Faustian bargain with a powerful art critic in exchange for status, riches, and the love of a woman." (80 pages, black and white trade paperback, \$8.95, ISBN 1-56163-447-6)

NBM is also putting out *Cryptozoo Crew* volume 2 by Jerry Carr and Allan Gross with cover art by Frank Cho. They describe it as: "What's the best way to pick up chicks? If you're Torq Darwin, Cryptozooologist Extraordinaire, you learn the hard way that it's not by the tail feathers! Especially if you're in a nest of young Thunderbirds! And if you think Momma Thunderbird's powerful beak and razor claws are dangerous, wait until Torq tries to solve his wife Tara's problems, when all she really wants to do is talk about her feelings!" (96 pages, color trade paperback, \$12.95, ISBN 1-56163-466-2). They also have volume 1 still available, in which Torq and Tara "discover unknown creatures, visit lost civilizations, and fight for the Torq remote."

Market Reports

Jim Baen's Universe editor Eric Flint has posted guidelines at www.baenssoundingstories.com/subguide.html. Submissions must be

electronic, either e-mailed to submissions@baensuniverse.com or through the web site, as either an RTF or MS Word file. He'll be reserving two slots in each issue "to introduce new writers." Submissions for the new writers section must be submitted via the website bar.baen.com. The pay rates for "commissioned stories" range down from 25 cents a word for stories up to 5,000 words, up to \$4,600 for a 40,000-word piece, and six cents a word for anything longer; their "rates are lower for stories that we buy from unsolicited manuscripts," and range from 6 to 15 cents a word "depending on various factors." They're also offering royalties if an issue earns out, just as if it were an anthology, and if "Baen Books decides to reissue the magazine later in paper format, we will also pay book royalty rates."

Orson Scott Card has launched a quarterly on-line magazine called *The Intergalactic Medicine Show*, available at www.intergalacticmedicineshow.com. He plans to keep the content child friendly, or, as he puts it, PG-13. His guidelines say he's looking for science fiction and fantasy of any length, and paying 6 cents a word up to \$500 (maximum pay per piece) for one year's exclusive rights. He also seems to have plans (or is at least planning for the possibility) of publishing print anthologies of the on-line magazine's content. Submissions must be through the web site's submission form.

Bookselling

Horror and supernatural comics publisher Chaos Comics is back after launching such titles as *Evil Ernie*, *Chastity*, and *Purgatori* in the 1990s. Now they've signed Diamond Book Distributors as their exclusive distributor.

Chanting Monks Press, in an effort to promote both their own *Zacherley's Midnight Terrors* and local comic shops, is making an almost-ready-to-air television commercial available for free through Diamond Book Distributors. The commercial, which stars The Cool Ghoul (Zacherley) is intended to open up TV advertising to retailers who otherwise might not have the means or access to tap the TV market. "Shooting a TV commercial for your comic shop is cost prohibitive," said Chanting Monks President Joseph M. Monks. "You're looking at five figures, minimum, to do anything that is suitable for broadcast, and that is truly low-low budget. That's before spending a cent on air time. It's probably the biggest hurdle for any retailer to overcome, despite advertising being necessary to grow their businesses. So we decided to eliminate most of the cost for them." The commercial has both a 30- and 45-second versions, with product shot and fade time for retailers to customize the spot. "If you want, you can even be in it," said Monks. "You are getting the raw files, so you can run your store logo at the beginning, the end, whenever you want. If you want to open on a shot of your store and go right into the spot, you have the means. If you want to appear to say how great your store is and give the information yourself, bingo, you can do it. We're providing the files on DVD so that with little effort, anybody can add what they wish, and go to their local cable or broadcast station and start booking space."

Bookseller Catalogs & Websites

DreamHaven Books & Comics sends out a monthly electronic catalog of numbered, limited, signed, and first edition books. The store is located at 912 W Lake St, Minneapolis, MN 55408 (phone: 612-823-6070). For more information, see www.dreamhavenbooks.com.

Randomhouse.com sends out a monthly catalog of new books which also includes contests and savings on e-books and downloads. To

HEADLINES

subscribe, send a blank e-mail to sub_whatsnew@info.randomhouse.com, or see the web site at www.randomhouse.com.

Del Rey sends out a monthly internet newsletter listing forthcoming books, author events, and other news. To subscribe, send a blank e-mail to sub_Drin-dist@info.randomhouse.com.

Eos sends out a monthly internet newsletter with news about its titles, lists of forthcoming books, reviews, a contest, and listings of author events. To subscribe, e-mail cosubs@harpercollins.com, and put "Eos Online Newsletter Subscription Request" in the subject line.

The Standing Wave is "your inside source for the latest news and information on science fiction and fantasy books from Aspect, Warner Books, and Little Brown." To subscribe, see their web site at www.twbookmark.com/sciencefiction/index.html.

The Virtual Plot is an occasional electronic newsletter published by Mysterious Galaxy bookstore, listing upcoming events and more. To subscribe, send an e-mail to majordomo@www.mystgalaxy.com saying "subscribe virtualplot", or see their web site at www.mystgalaxy.com.

Wildside Press publishes a monthly electronic newsletter containing news, reviews, interviews, lists of forthcoming books, and announcements of new acquisitions. To subscribe, see www.wildsidepress.com.

Nigel Williams Rare Books sends out a monthly electronic catalog of its UK first editions. For more information, see www.nigelwilliams.com.

Mile High Comics sends out regular electronic catalogs and sales announcements of their comics and books. For more information, see www.milehighcomics.com.

Dark Delicacies offers an electronic newsletter of upcoming in-store events. To subscribe, see the web site at www.darkdel.com.

Fantastic Literature Limited sends out an electronic "chatologue" of signed, limited edition books, along with queries for lost titles (of the sort, "I remember reading a story that went sort of like this. What was its title?"). For more information, see www.fantasticaliterature.com.

Arsenal Pulp Press sends out a monthly electronic newsletter featuring news of its titles and authors, interesting links, and lists of forthcoming titles. This eclectic small Canadian house publishes everything from "Food and Drink" and "Arts, Politics, and Culture" to "Gay and Lesbian fiction and nonfiction" and, oh yeah, "Science Fiction." To subscribe, see their web site at www.arsenalpulp.com.

Renaissance E Books sends out an occasional news and announcement listing of their classic and contemporary sf, fantasy, and horror. For more information, see www.renebooks.com.

Top Shelf Productions sends out an electronic newsletter covering new online comics, news of their authors, and listings of new and forthcoming comics. To subscribe, see www.topshelfcomix.com.

Publications Received

Dasfax, the newsletter of the Denver Area Science Fiction Association, 741 King St, Denver, CO 80204; www.dasfax.org (\$15 per year, newsletter published monthly, 8 page).

*Star*Line*, the Journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association, is published six times a year. The 24-page issue contains poems, reviews, market news, and organizational announcements. One year dues (\$18) includes a subscription: 1225 W Freeman St, Apt 12, Carbondale, IL 62901; www.sfpoetry.com. November/December 2005 issue has poetry by Lee Ballentine, Greg Beatty, Denise Dumars, Marcus Ewert, Andrei Dorian Gheorghie, Elizabeth Keogh, K.J. Kirby, Yoon Ha Lee, Melissa Marr, Karen R. Porter, Ann K. Schwader, Darrell Schweitzer, Steve

Sneyd, and JoSelle Vanderhooft; and articles, essays, market news, and reviews. This issue also includes a ballot (for SFFA members only) to vote on whether or not to add a short-short (less than 10 lines) category to the Rhysling Awards for best poem.

True Review, a science fiction, fantasy, horror, and mystery review magazine published and edited by Andrew M. Andrews, 110 Buchland Rd, Ephrata, PA 17522; aandrews@ptd.net (\$2.50/issue; \$8 for four quarterly issues, 6 pages).

Author Readings & Signings

Mysterious Galaxy (7051 Claremont Mesa Blvd, Suite #302, San Diego, CA 92111) will host David Kalstein on 4 February at 2pm; Timothy Zahn on 25 February at 2pm; Randy Wayne White on 30 March at 7pm; and David Skibbins on 9 April at 2pm. For more information, phone the store at 858-268-4747, or see www.mystgalaxy.com.

Dark Delicacies (4213 W. Burbank Blvd, Burbank, CA 91505) will host Christa Faust and Hilber Graf on 4 February at 2pm; Pete and Andrea Von Sholly on 18 March at 2pm; Sherrilyn Kenyon on 1 April at 12n; Ray Harryhausen and David Schechter on 22 April; Stephen Jones and Kim Newman (tentative) on 14 May at 6pm; and Brian Keene and JF Gonzalez on 20 May. For more information, phone the store at 818-556-6660, or see www.darkdel.com.

Barnes & Noble (4801 Concord Pike, Wilmington, DE 19803) will host Eric Enck on 4 February at 1pm; and Maria V. Snyder on 16 March at 7pm. For more information, phone the store at 302-478-9677.

Borderlands Books (866 Valencia St, San Francisco, CA 94110) will host Richard Paul Russo on 4 February at 3pm; Donald Sidney-Fryer on 18 February at 4pm; and Justine Larbalestier and Scott Westerfield on 7 March at 7pm. For more information, phone the store at 415-824-8203, or see www.borderlands-books.com.

Powell's Books in Beaverton (8725 SW Cascade Ave, Beaverton, OR 97008) will host Timothy Zahn on 9 February at 7pm. For more information, see www.powells.com.

Barnes & Noble in Jack London Square (98 Broadway, Oakland, CA 94607) will host Guy Gavriel Kay on 11 February at 7pm. For more information, phone the store at 510-272-0120.

Bennett Martin Public Library (136 S 14 St at N St, Lincoln, NE 68508) will host Robert Reed on 16 February at 6:30pm. For more information, phone the library at 402-441-8500.

DreamHaven Books (912 W Lake St, Minneapolis, MN 55408) will host Rebecca Marjessdatter on 28 February and Elizabeth Moon on 20 April. Both events start at 6:30pm. For more information, phone the store at 612-823-6161, or see www.dreamhavenbooks.com.

Fantastic Fiction at KGB reading series, hosted by Ellen Datlow and Gavin J. Grant, present: James Patrick Kelly and Douglas Lain on 15 February; Judith Moffett on 15 March; Jeffrey Ford and Nick Mamatas on 19 April; and Holly Black and John Langan on 18 May. All events are the third Wednesday of the month at 7pm at the KGB Bar, 85 East 4th Street, New York City. Updates on the web at www.lcrw.net/kgb.

The New York Review of Science Fiction reading series at New York's South Street Seaport (Melville Gallery, 213 Water St) presents Jonathan Lethem on 7 March and Robert Freeman Wexler on 4 April. The series continues the first Monday of each month. Doors open at 6:30pm with the readings starting at 7pm. Most readings are taped for broadcast on Jim Freund's "Hour of the Wolf" radio program on WBAI 99.5FM. Updates on the web at www.hourwolf.com/nrfs.

HEADLINES

Philadelphia Fantastic presents readings and informal discussions with authors on the fourth Friday of the month. Readings are free; dinner with the author is pay-as-you-go. For more information, see www.philadelphiafantastic.com.

The Garden State Horror Writers meets on the second Saturday of the month at the Monmouth County Library. Scheduled speakers include Jeffrey Ford on 18 February and Jack Ketchum on 17 June. Guest speakers start at 12n. For more information, call 838-992-2230 or see www.gshw.net.

Awards

This year's Universitat Politècnica Catalunya Science Fiction Award of €6,000 went to *Diving Into the Wreck* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch of the USA. The €1,500 Honorable Mention went to *Semiotica para Lobos* (*Semiotics for Wolves*) by Vladimir Hernández Pacin of Spain. And the UPC Mention, for a member of the University community, went to *Óbol* by Eugeni Guillem Darné (in Catalan) and *P.L.C.* by Albert Solanes Parra (in Spanish).

The French Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire were announced 11 November in Nantes, France. The winners are: French novel: *La horde du contrevient* by Alain Damasio; Foreign novel: *The Separation* by Christopher Priest; French short story: "Le monde tous droits réservés" by Claude Ecken; Foreign short story: "Exoskeleton Town" by Jeffery Ford; Juvenile novel: *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funk; Translation: Patrick Marcel for *The Book of Ashi*; Cover art: Guillaume Sorel for *The Book of Ashi*; Non-fiction: "Les contes merveilleux français" by Marie-Louise Ténèze.

Barry R. Levin Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature has presented their 18th annual Collectors Awards. The winners for 2005 are: Jack Vance for Most Collectable Author of the Year; Hill House Publishers for Most Collectable Book of the Year (the lettered state of *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman); and Daniel J.H. Levack for the Lifetime Collectors Award for "his outstanding bibliographic contributions to the study of the works of L. Sprague de Camp, Philip K. Dick, Frank Herbert, Jack Vance, and Roger Zelazny."

The Third Annual Wooden Rocket Awards for science fiction and fantasy web sites (sponsored by SF Crowsnest) were recently announced. The winners are: Online Magazine: *Sci-Fiction* (www.scifi.com/scifiction/); Print-to-Web Magazine: *Locus Online* (www.locusmag.com/); Author Site: Stephen Baxter's *The Manifold* (www.themanifold.co.uk/); Artist Site: Michael Whelan (www.michaelwhelan.com/); Gallery Site: ASFA (www.asfa-art.org/); Print Publisher Site: The Black Library (www.blacklibrary.com/); E-book Publisher Site: Blackmask Online (www.blackmask.com/); E-book Site: *FB Hamilton* (www.slicerdragon.com/); Official Movie Site: *Serenity* (www.serenitymovie.com/); Fan Movie Site: *Kong is King* (www.kongisking.net/); Official TV Site: *Doctor Who* (www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/index.shtml); Fan TV Site: *Krypton Site* (www.kryptonsite.com/); Online SF Store: Forbidden Planet (www.forbiddenplanet.com/); Directory Site: Internet Speculative Fiction Database (www.isfdb.org/); Convention/Organization Site: SF Hub (www.sfhub.ac.uk/); Foreign Language Site: *Galaxies* (www.galaxies-sf.com/); Blog: Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net/); Rich Content: TSFPN (www.tsfpn.com/).

Award Nominations

Nominations for this year's Hugo Awards (to be given at L.A.Con IV,

the 2006 World Science Fiction Convention this summer) opened on 1 January, and must be received by 10 March. As always, attending and supporting members of last year's WorldCon, as well as those who join L.A.Con IV by 31 January, are eligible to nominate. This year, in addition to all the usual categories, the committee has added a Best Interactive Video Game category. Ballots were mailed with Progress Report #3 at the end of December, and are available on the web site at www.laconiv.org.

The Carl Brandon Society is now accepting published long and short print speculative fiction in English to be considered for two juried awards designed to recognize excellence in speculative fiction by or about people of color. Each award comes with a \$1,000 prize. To be eligible, works must have been published in English in 2005. The Carl Brandon Parallax Award will be given "to works of fiction created by a person of color" (nominees must provide a statement identifying themselves as "a person of color"). Submission deadline is 1 February. The Carl Brandon Kindred Award will be given "to any work of speculative fiction dealing with issues of race and ethnicity; nominees may be of any racial or ethnic backgrounds." Submission deadline is 1 March. To nominate or for more details, see www.carlbrandon.org. The awards will be presented at WisCon 30, held 26-29 May in Madison, Wisconsin.

The 2005 Philip K. Dick Award nominees have been announced. They are: *Cowl* by Neal Asher (published by Tor); *War Surf* by M.M. Buckner (Ace); *Cagebird* by Karin Lowachee (Warner Aspect); *Natural History* by Justina Robson (Bantam Spectra); *Silver Screen* by Justina Robson (Pyr); and *To Crush the Moon* by Wil McCarthy (Bantam Spectra). First prize and any special citations will be announced on 14 April at Norwescon 29 at the Doubletree Seattle Airport Hotel, SeaTac, Washington. The award, sponsored by the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society and the Northwest Science Fiction Society, is presented annually for distinguished science fiction published in paperback original form in the United States. The 2005 judges are Charles Coleman Finlay, Kay Kenyon, Robert Metzger, Lyda Morehouse, and Graham Murphy (chair).

The second annual Story Prize, an award for books of short fiction, has announced the three finalists: *The Summer He Didn't Die* by Jim Harrison, *Mothers & Other Monsters* by Maureen F. McHugh, and *The Hill Road* by Patrick O'Keefe. The finalists were chosen by Story Prize Founder Julie Lindsey and Director Larry Dark from 82 books entered by 44 publishers. The three judges who will determine the winner are writer Andrea Barrett, librarian and writer Nancy Pearl, and *New Republic* editor James Wood. At the awards ceremony (25 January 2006 in the New School's Tishman Auditorium in New York City), the three finalists will read selections from their work and be interviewed on-stage before the announcement of the winner, who will receive \$20,000 and an engraved silver bowl (the runners-up will each receive \$5,000).

Contests

L.A.Con IV, the 2006 WorldCon, is holding an open competition to design the base of this year's Hugo Award trophies. The award itself is the unchanging silver rocket, but the base changes every year, to reflect the host city/country of the WorldCon. Bases must make the rocket an integral part of the award; must sit on a flat surface; be made of a simple, fixed material (wood, metal, lucite, etc.); allow space for plaques with the convention's and award's names; and be sturdy, yet easily shipped. With the design submission, the committee also needs to know how

HEADLINES

much it would cost to fabricate 25 bases, how long it would take, and the designer's ability to either make them or oversee their production. "As a guideline, bases should cost less than \$200 each (preferably much less) to fabricate." The deadline to submit designs is 15 January 2006. "Please send designs, samples, or questions to us at hugobases@laconiv.org or L.A.Con IV; Attn: Hugo Bases; P.O. Box 8442; Van Nuys CA 91409." (Okay, send the samples to the P.O. Box. But if you figure out how to send a sample via email, that would be really cool.) Three finalists will be chosen, each of whom will receive a free full membership to the convention. The winner will receive an additional \$250 prize, and be on-stage at the Hugo Award ceremony to present the design.

Moonstone Books has launched an online discussion forum at www.moonstonebooks.com, and in honor of their tenth anniversary, they're running contests every other month for forum participants. To enter, readers will need to register and participate in the forums, and answer trivia questions placed in threads on the forum. The first prize, for the month of December, was a page of original art from Chuck Dixon and Eric J's run on *The Phantom*; three runners-up received signed Moonstone books.

Fifty finalists for Circlet Press's first annual "Best Fantastic Erotica" contest have been selected out of the hundreds of manuscripts received. The top 20 stories will be published in Summer 2006 in the *Best Fantastic Erotica* anthology, while the rest will be given "honorable mention." The finalists include Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Jason Rubis, A.R. Morlan, and B. Lynch Black. The winner and selections for the book will be announced on 15 February. For more details, see www.circlet.com.

Exhibits

Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art founder Larry Klein has stepped down as president, though he will remain Chairman. Taking over as president is Ken Wong. Replacing Wong as COO is Matt Murray. And David Ennis and Carole Postal have been appointed to the MOCCA Board of Trustees.

The Museum of Science in Boston, Massachusetts, in conjunction with Lucasfilm, Ltd., presents "Star Wars: Where Science Meets Imagination," which will highlight parallels between technologies portrayed in the *Star Wars* films and real-world technologies being developed today. The exhibit will include artwork, props, models, film clips, and documentary footage from the films, as well as hands-on science components and interactive engineering and computer technologies. The exhibit runs through 30 April. In conjunction with the exhibit is "The Worlds of Far, Far Away," a planetarium show narrated by Anthony Daniels. Updates and more information are available at starwars.mos.org, or call 617-723-2500.

Stage & Radio

"Hour of the Wolf," hosted by Jim Freund, is a science fiction talk radio show featuring in-depth interviews, readings, radio drama, music, and listener phone calls. It airs in New York City on Saturday mornings from 5-7 AM on WBAI 99.5 FM. Recent episodes are also available as streaming media (not MP3 or Podcast downloads) at www.hourofthewolf.com/toc.html.

"Sound & Spirit," hosted by Ellen Kushner, "celebrates the human experience around the world and through the ages, exploring the myth and magic, traditions and beliefs that unite us all in common humanity." Based in Boston, it airs on Sundays at 5 PM on WGBH 89.7 FM, on

many other National Public Radio stations, and on www.wgbh.org/pri/spirit.

Education

Jeffrey A. Carver offers a free, online course of sf/f writing, which "grew out of a course I created for MathSoft's 'Studyworks Science!' a few years ago, which in turn grew out of a series of distance-learning TV shows I created for middle school classrooms back in 1995." Though aimed primarily at young adult writers new to the field, older new writers will also find some use in the course. Carver blurb the course thus: "Free online guide for young writers, created by SF author Jeffrey A. Carver. Useful to aspiring writers of all ages, it covers the fundamental skills needed to write successful SF and fantasy stories. Topics include getting from idea to story, world building, creating human and alien characters, plot and conflict, language and style, finishing what you start, rewriting, workshopping, getting published, and more." He posted it as a public service to young aspiring writers, and sf.net is hosting it for free, also as a public service. The course is available at www.writesf.com.

Organizations & Conferences

The Science Fiction Poetry Association is considering a motion to create a new short-short Rhysling Award category for poems of 1 to 9 lines. Ballots are due by 14 January.

Registration for SF WA's 2006 Nebula Award Weekend, to be held 4-7 May at the Tempe Mission Palms in Tempe, Arizona, is \$110. There's also a \$35 "panels and parties" membership available. For hotel reservations (\$137/night), call 800-547-8705. More information on the weekend, including a registration form, is available at www.sfwaweb.org/awards/2006.

Membership rates for the 2006 World Horror Convention, to be held 11-14 May in San Francisco, California, US, are \$135 for attending, \$50 for supporting. Guests of Honor include Peter Straub, Clive Barker, Kim Newman, Koji Suzuki, John Peln, Hiroki Sakai, and Brom. For more information, see www.whc2006.org.

Application deadline for the 2006 Odyssey Writing Workshop, to be held 12 June-21 July on the campus of St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, is 14 April. Teachers will be Christopher Golden, Laurie J. Marks, Shawna McCarthy, Robert J. Sawyer, Melissa Scott, and Jeff VanderMeer. Tuition is \$1,600 (on-campus housing, \$625). Application information is available at www.sff.net/odyssey; by email from founder Jeanne Cavelos at javelos@sff.net, or from Odyssey, 20 Levesque Lane, Box G Mount Vernon, NH 03057.

Application deadline for the 2006 Clarion West Writers Workshop, to be held 18 June-26 July in Seattle, Washington, is 1 April. Teachers will be Ellen Datlow, Nalo Hopkinson, Ian R. MacLeod, Maureen McHugh, Paul Park, and Vernor Vinge. Tuition is \$1,700 (housing and partial board, \$1,200). For more information, see www.clarionwest.org/website/index.html.

Application deadline for the 2006 Clarion Workshop for sf writers, to be held 26 June-4 August at Michigan State University, is 1 April. Teachers will be Samuel R. Delaney, Gardner Dozois, Nancy Kress, Joe and Gay Haldeman, and Kelly Link and Holly Black. Application information is available at www.msu.edu/~clarion, by email from clarion@msu.edu, or from Clarion Workshop, 112 Olds Hall, Michigan State University, Lansing MI 48824-1047.

Application deadline for the Alpha SF/F/H Workshop for Young Writers, to be held 19-29 July at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is 31 March. Author guests are Theodora Goss, Tamora Pierce, Wen Spencer, and Timothy Zahn. Twenty students (ages 14 to 19) will be

HEADLINES

accepted based only on the merit of their submitted stories. Application form and more information is available at alpha.spellcaster.org.

Membership rates for L.A.Con IV, the 2006 WorldCon, to be held 23-27 August in Anaheim, California, US, are \$175 for adults, \$50 for children (both attending), and \$50 for supporting memberships. Progress Report #3, all 60 pages of it, mailed on 22 December 2005, and contains the Hugo nomination ballot. This year's ballot includes a new category: Best Interactive Video Game. Guests of Honor include Connie Willis, James Gurney, Howard DeVore, and Frankie Thomas. For more information, see www.laconiv.org.

The Viable Paradise writers' workshop will be held 7-15 October 2006 on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Submissions must be received between 1 January and 15 June. For more information, see www.viableparadise.com.

The 2006 World Fantasy Convention will be held 2-5 November in Austin, Texas. For more information, see www.worldfantasy.org.

Robert A. Heinlein Centennial Convention has recently been announced. Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the author's birth (7 July 1907 in Butler, Missouri), the convention will be held at the Crown Center Complex, Hyatt Regency Crown Center and the Westin Crown Center hotels in Kansas City, MO, 6-8 July 2007. For more information, see www.HeinleinCentennial.com.

Membership rates for Archon, the 2007 NASFiC, to be held 2-5 August 2007 (which is two months earlier than the usual Archon) in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, are \$60 (adult), \$45 (young adult), \$35 (child), and \$35 (supporting). Guests of Honor include Barbara Hambly, Darryl K. Sweet, Mira Furlan, Nancy Hathaway, Roger Tener, and Vil Milán. PO Box 8387, St. Louis, MO 63132; www.archonstl.org.

Membership rates for Nippon 2007, the 2007 WorldCon, to be held 30 August-3 September 2007 in Japan, are \$180/\$20,000 through 30 June. Guests of Honor include Sakyo Komatsu, David Brin, Takumi Shibano, Yoshitaka Amano, and Michael Whelan. For more information, see www.nippon2007.org.

The 2007 World Fantasy Convention will be held 1-4 November 2007 at the Saratoga Springs City Center in Saratoga Springs, New York. The organizing group, LASTSFA, also intends to hold its annual science fiction convention, Albacon, the weekend of 5-7 October that year.

Denver 2008 is a 2008 WorldCon bid for 6-10 August. Pre-Supporting membership is \$20 (Pre-Opposing: \$40; Friends: \$100). Denver 2008 WorldCon Bid, 1245 Allegheny Dr, Colorado Springs, CO 80919; www.denver2008.com.

Chicago in '08 is a 2008 WorldCon bid for 28 August-1 September. Pre-Supporting Hot Dog membership is \$20 (Com Dog, \$50; Top Dog, \$75). PO Box 13, Skokie, IL 60076; www.chicagoworldcon7.org.

Columbus in 2008 is a 2008 WorldCon bid, for 28 August-1 September 2008. Pre-Supporting (and Pre-Opposing) membership is \$20 (Pre-Dithering, \$50; Best Friend's, \$75). PO Box 13559, Columbus, OH 43213; www.bidcolumbus.org.

Anticipation is a 2009 WorldCon bid for 6-10 August in Montreal, Canada. Pre-Supporting membership is \$20/\$25 (Pre-opposing: \$25/\$30; "bon ami" \$100/\$125). C.P. 505, Succursale NDG, Montreal, Quebec, H4A 3P8 Canada; www.anticipations.ca.

Film & Television

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame and the Seattle International Film Festival Group are co-sponsoring the Science Fiction Short Film Festival. Films were submitted in 2005, and they will be screened in a festival 3-4 February at the Cinema Theatre and JBL Theatre at Experience Music Project in Seattle, Washington. For more

information, see www.sfhomeworld.org or www.seattlefilm.org.

Paramount Pictures outbid NBC Universal, and is acquiring DreamWorks SKG for about \$1.6 billion. DreamWorks has produced such genre films as last year's *War of the Worlds*, *The Ring 1 and II*, *Shrek 1 and 2*, *The Time Machine* (2002), *AI*, *Galaxy Quest*, and *Deep Impact*.

An original poster for the 1920 film *Metropolis* recently sold to an American private collector for \$400,000 (\$690,000). The poster, by graphic artist Heinz Schula-Neudamm, is one of only four known to still exist. One of the other three is in another private collection, and the remaining two are at New York City's Museum of Modern Art and Berlin's Film Museum.

The SciFi Channel has picked up the new *Doctor Who* series, which has been airing on BBC. Series One should debut on the Channel in March, pushing back the anticipated release of the DVD set to 4 July.

Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin group of companies, has two new ventures. Virgin Animation will be based in India, and will partner with Gotham Animation and Deepak Shoppa. They have no announced projects at press time. (see also Manga/Graphic Novels)

The Golden Globes, given by the Hollywood Foreign Press, were announced in January. Genre nominees included: Peter Jackson for *King Kong* (Motion Picture Director); Johnny Depp for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Musical or Comedy Motion Picture Actor); James Newton Howard for *King Kong* (Original Score, Motion Picture); Harry Gregson-Williams for *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Original Score, Motion Picture); and "Wunderkind" from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Original Story, Motion Picture). None of them won the awards.

At the end of December, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington announced 25 films he was adding to the National Film Registry's list of classics (bringing the total to 425). The films on the list, according to the National Film Preservation Act, are "culturally, historically, or aesthetically" significant. This year's list included three genre films: *Miracle on 34th Street* (from 1947), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Toy Story* (1995). The full list is available at www.loc.gov/film.

The 12th season of CBS Television's *Survivor*, set in Panama, will include Dan Barry as a contestant. Barry, aged 52, is a retired astronaut from South Hadley, Massachusetts. He was selected by NASA for astronaut training in 1992, and flew aboard STS-72 on *Endeavour* (11-20 January 1996), STS-96 on *Discovery* (27 May-6 June 1999), and STS-105 again on *Discovery* (10-22 August 2001), logging 734 hours in space including four spacewalks totalling 25 hours, 53 minutes. He retired from NASA in April 2005 to start his own company, Denbar Robotics.

Web Sites

RevolutionsF, the self-proclaimed "home for unique imaginative fiction" publishes new and reprint fiction weekly. www.revolutionsf.com.

January Magazine publishes tributes, excerpts, and reviews of fiction, crime fiction, non-fiction, children's books, art & culture, and SF/F. www.JanuaryMagazine.com.

Ralan's Market Report is updated monthly by Ralan Conley, and has listings of professional, semi-professional, and amateur markets for writers, as well as occasional contests for writers. www.ralan.com.

Author Dee Rimbau has a "free resource for writers. The AA

HEADLINES

Independent Press Guide is a detailed guide to over 2,000 literary and genre magazines and publishers from around the world. It also includes links to over 700 internet magazines, and links pages to writers' and artists' web pages and writers' resources." www.thunderburst.co.uk.

SFReva.com is updated monthly with book, zine, short fiction, DVD, and media reviews, occasional convention reviews, interviews, photos, and editorials by Editor Ernest Lilley.

Sime-Gen Perspectives Newsletter offers reviews, interviews, and online writing classes at www.simegen.com.

E-book author Darrell Bain has a new web site at www.darrellbain.com. He posts a monthly newsletter which includes "writing news, discussion of subjects brought up by fans, family life, and any other item that strikes his fancy while in the writing mode."

Discussion Groups

The Long Island Science Fiction Discussion Group meets the first Tuesday of every month at 8PM at the Borders Café, on Old Country Rd in Westbury, Long Island, NY. See scififg.garysguide.com.

The South Shore Sci Fi Readers Group meets the fourth Sunday of every month at 2PM at the Barnes & Noble Café, 150 Granite St, Braintree, MA 02184. See groups.yahoo.com/group/southshore_scifi. Mysterious Galaxy's book discussion group meets Wednesdays at 7PM at the store. They'll be discussing *Dark Glory War* by Michael Stackpole on 1 March, and *Midnight Mass* by F. Paul Wilson on 12 April. The store is located at 7051 Clairemont Mesa Blvd, Suite #302, San Diego, CA 92111. For more information, phone the store at 858-268-4747, or see www.mystgalaxy.com.

Powell's Science Fiction Book Group meets at Powell's Books, 8725 SW Cascade Ave, Beaverton, OR 97008 (see www.powells.com). On 14 February at 7PM, they'll be discussing *The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester.

FACT SF Reading Group used to meet at Adventures in Crime & Space, but as the store is currently in the process of moving, they're meeting at members' homes in the Austin, Texas, area. They'll be discussing *Going Postal* by Terry Pratchett on 7 February; *Rocket Science* by Jay Lake on 21 February; *Magic Casement* by Dave Duncan on 7 March; *Godplayers* by Damien Broderick on 21 March; *Survival* by Julie Czerneda on 4 April; and *Old Man's War* by John Scalzi on 18 April. For more information or to join the group, e-mail reading@fact.org.

Science Fiction Becoming Science Fact

McFarland & Company has published a new book by Terry L. Kerner entitled *Extrasolar Planets: A Catalog of Discoveries in Other Star Systems*. The contents are precisely what one would expect from the title. The book has an in-depth discussion of astronomical methods and how the planets were found, what their existence may mean, and if there are others lurking as yet undiscovered. For each of the 161 planetary candidates in 135 star systems (as of 1 August 2005), he gives the star type, location, the best-guess estimates of planetary data, and the history of its discovery. There are also graphs of the likely planetary systems, plots of each star's habitable zone, and discussions of the likelihood of Earth-like planets. The 206-page trade paperback is available from www.mcfarlandpub.com or by calling 800-253-2187 (\$45.00, ISBN 0-7864-2405-2).

And speaking of new planets, NASA launched the first mission to Pluto on 19 January. At 2PM, the New Horizons spacecraft lifted off

from Cape Canaveral on a ten-year flight to the ninth planet. The launch came after two days of delays, but went off without a hitch. About 43 minutes after launch, the spacecraft separated successfully from the rocket's third stage and headed out. After a planned gravity assist from a Jupiter flyby in a year and a half, New Horizons should reach a speed of 47,000 miles per hour as it flies for nine more years to get to Pluto. Beyond that planetary encounter (more of a brief flyby), the craft should head into the Kuiper Belt and possibly return more data about the icy outer reaches of the Solar System.

NASA has issued a solicitation for proposals for companies interested in handling delivery services to the International Space Station now that the Space Shuttle fleet is grounded and due to be retired in 2010. Proposals are due to NASA by 10 February, and NASA expects to award one or more contracts in May. They've allotted \$500 million to pay for the initial phases of the program through 2010.

Updating a story in our June 2005 issue, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, the planned space tourism company, signed an agreement with the state of New Mexico to build a \$225 million spaceport there. The company also said that up to 38,000 people from 126 countries have put a deposit for a trip into space (including 100 "founders" who have paid the full \$200,000 cost up front). They plan to begin flights in late 2008 or 2009. New Mexico Economic Development Secretary Rick Homans said the spaceport, to be built about 25 miles south of Truth or Consequences, near the White Sands Missile Range could begin early next year, depending upon approval from environmental and aviation authorities. It will be 90 percent underground, with just the runway and support structures above ground. Virgin Galactic will have a 20-year lease on the spaceport with annual payments starting at \$1 million.

Other Stuff

The National Endowment for the Arts has allocated \$265,000 to underwrite Big Read pilot programs in ten communities. The action follows the NEA's 2004 study "Reading at Risk," which showed a decline in reading. The program, in conjunction with Arts Midwest, will run from February to May, and will include read-out-loud marathons, film series and other presentations related to the chosen novels, and keynote presentations on each novel. The sponsors will provide organizer's and reader's guides, CD-ROMs "featuring distinguished actors and writers," a program web site, technical assistance to implement the program, and promotional materials. If the series is a success, the NEA anticipates expanding the program to 100 cities for 2007. The chosen novels and cities are: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (Enterprise, OR; Miami, FL; Buffalo, NY; and Boise, ID); *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Little Rock, AR; and Huntsville, AL); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (Minneapolis, MN; and Topeka, KS); and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (Fresno, CA; and Brookings/Sioux Falls, SD).

Marce Gagneau, the first Canadian astronaut to fly in space, is running as a Liberal candidate in the Canadian federal elections in late January. He's running in the rural riding of Vaudreuil-Soulanges, near Montreal. The 56-year-old Quebec City native flew aboard the Space Shuttle in 1984, 1996, and 2000.

Scam agent/publisher Martha Ivory, aka Kelly O'Donnell, who did business as Press-Tige Publishing, pleaded guilty on 5 December 2005 to 15 counts of mail fraud and acts against the United States as a principal in a conspiracy, one count of improper use of an electronic device, and one count of false sworn testimony in a bankruptcy

HEADLINES

proceeding. SFWA's Writer Beware began investigating her in 1998, and received so many complaints that they went to the FBI, which began a criminal investigation in 2001. She attempted to fold the business in mid 2002, was served a search warrant (and had much material removed from the premises) on 26 September 2002. She was arraigned on 3 June 2005, the indictment alleging that her scheming began in May 1995.

Mercury Astronaut L. Gordon Cooper's ashes will be on the same flight as those of *Star Trek's* James Doohan this year, according to Space Services, the Texas company providing the launching service. Cooper, who died in October 2004, became the first American astronaut to sleep in space when he flew the sixth Mercury mission in 1963 (he also flew aboard *Gemini 5* in 1965). Doohan died 20 July 2005.

Corrections

Not so much a correction as an update: the first volume in Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* trilogy, mentioned in our April 2005 issue, now has a title. It will be published by Voyager UK as a January hardcover under the title *Temeraire*, and by Del Rey as a US paperback in March as *His Majesty's Dragon*. Volumes two and three will be out in the US in April and May, and in England in June and December.

AUTHORS & EDITORS

Personnel

After less than four months as Director of Marketing at DC Comics, **Nellie Kurtzman** left to become Director of Marketing at Hyperion Books for Children. She said the timing of her move "is weird, but life's like that." Kurtzman is the daughter of the late Harvey Kurtzman, a comics editor and artist and co-founder of *Mad Magazine*.

Bob Greenberger was fired from his position at DC Comics on 6 January, apparently for problems (errors making it into print) which he'd already taken steps to rectify (such as hiring more staff). His full explanation of the events is available at http://bgblmailbulist.com/archives/2006/01/the_other_show.html. He's got several writing projects on his schedule, and is looking for more freelance work.

Several appointments have been announced at Scholastic's Trade Publishing division: **Jazan Higgins** was named Vice President of Cross Company Strategy & Special Projects; **Andrea Davis Pinkney** was hired as Vice President of Publisher Hardcover and Early Childhood; and **Catherine Daly** is the new Editorial Director of Paperbacks.

Ben Berlin is Director of Operations at Archie Comics Entertainment, LLC.

Howard Zimmerman is leaving Byron Preiss Visual Publications "in January to begin packaging books through my own company, Z File Inc." Zimmerman was with BPVP for 18 years, including 10 as editor in chief, but following Preiss' death in July, he has "decided that the best way for me to continue packaging books with the same excitement and vision is to become more fully involved with the entire process. Through Z File I will have the ability to create the same kind of interesting, fun, and richly illustrated books that I enjoyed producing with Byron for almost two decades." His new company will be generating proposals for illustrated children's books, educational and classroom material, adult fiction and non-fiction, and science-related books for children and adults. They'll also "explore the exciting possibilities of creating graphic novel programs for publishing imprints, focusing on adapting classic literature and award-winning novels, as well as new stories and series, through both licenses and commissions." Zimmerman and Z File can be reached at 212-874-4012 or cmndrim@aol.com.

Diamond Book Distributors recently hired **Scott Hatfill** in the newly

created position of Director of International Sales. His duties will include growing DBD's business in such regions as the UK, Canada, Asia, Australia, Europe, India, South Africa and the Middle-East. He was formerly the International Vice President at Al books, responsible for business development activities of the online bookseller, and before that, spent 16 years at Ingram Books, most recently serving as the Director of Sales and International Market Development.

DBD also announced that **Allan Greenberg** will be joining the company as a Sales Manager focusing on library and school sales, moving over from Diamond Comic Distributors, where he spent 16 years in the sales department.

Will Hinton has been promoted to Assistant Editor at HarperCollins' Eos.

Tina Jordan is the new Vice President of the Association of American Publishers, replacing the departing Katie Blough. Jordan has been "involved with public relations and special events at BookExpo America since 1997." At AAP, she'll "work with the trade executive committee and the smaller and independent publishers group, and oversee the AAP's statistics and educational programs as well as the Get Caught Reading campaign."

Doris Cooper left Simon & Schuster's Touchstone/Fireside imprint to be the new editor-in-chief of Crown's Clarkson Potter imprint.

Agent **Bill Clegg** has left Barnes & Clegg, the literary boutique agency he founded, for William Morris.

Jack Perry, playing the publishing merry-go-round, is the new Vice President and Director of Sales for Random House's publishing group. He leaves a similar post at Scholastic for the position at his old company (he worked in Random's sales department from 1993 to 2002).

Scott Shannon left his position as Associate Publisher at Pocket Books to become Vice President, Deputy Publisher of Del Rey mass market and licensing under the Random House umbrella. His focus will be on the science fiction, fantasy, and manga lines. He replaces Anthony Ziccardi, who left Random last year for Pocket.

Random House Vice President and Director of Publicity **Tom Perry** adds the title of Associate Publisher.

After six years in the position, **Farah Mendlesohn** will be retiring as Editor of *Foundation* after issue #100 in 2007. **Graham Sleight** will succeed her.

Activities

Author **Robert Conquest**, who wrote sf novel *A World of Difference* and edited *Spectrum*, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He is best known for his work as a historian, and published *The Great Terror*, which examined the Russian Revolution.

Author **Arthur C. Clarke** received the title Sri Lankabhimanaya in a 14 November investiture ceremony in his adopted home of Sri Lanka. He is only the second person to receive the honor, which was presented for "his contributions to science and technology and his commitment to his adopted country."

Effective 1 January, **Cory Doctorow** joined the realm of full-time freelance writers. Announcing the move on his blog, he said he's leaving the employ of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, though he will remain a Fellow of the EFF.

Media Sales

Motion picture rights to **Kenneth J. Harvey's** *The Town that Forgot How to Breathe* (published by St. Martin's Press in November 2005) have been optioned by Catherine Gourdier (*Some Things that Stay*) and Don Carmody (*Good Will Hunting*, Chicago). Foreign rights have been sold in Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy,

HEADLINES

Russia, and Sweden.

Film rights and script rights to **Graham Joyce's** *The Tooth Fairy* have been optioned to **Nick Brandt** and Beyond Bedlam Productions, with Joyce writing a new screenplay. (Agents: Eli Kirschner, Created By, and Chris Lotts, Ralph M. Vicinanza, Ltd.)

Studio Ghibli is adapting **Ursula K. Le Guin's** *Earthsea* cycle for anime release in July. The film, entitled *Gedo Senki—Tales from Earthsea* (*Record of the Gedo War—Tales from Earthsea*) will be directed by Goro Miyazaki.

Joseph Nassise's *Heretic* (the first volume in *The Templar Chronicles*, published by Pocket in October 2005), "will be released in a free, thirty-episode, weekly podcast read by Nassise and sponsored by The Horror Channel and The Podcast Network." The podcast will be available at www.horrorchannel.com or www.thepodcastnetwork.com.

The filming of **Christopher Priest's** 1995 novel *The Prestige*, about the rivalry of two stage magicians in the early 1900s, should begin in January. Christopher Nolan is directing the adaptation based on his brother, Jonathan's script. The Disney production has a \$40 million budget, and stars Christian Bale, Michael Caine, and Hugh Jackman. The novel won the World Fantasy Award, and Tor has recently released a new trade paperback edition (\$14.95, 404 pages, ISBN 0-312-85886-8).

Short Fiction Sales

Douglas Cohen recently made his first sale, novelette "Feelings of the Flesh" to **Andy Cox** at *Interzone*.

Book & Novel Sales

Two new installments in **R. Scott Bakker's** epic fantasy series *The Saga of the Second Apocalypse* have been sold to his Canadian, US, and British publishers (Penguin Canada, The Overlook Press, and Time Warner UK, respectively) for advances nicely into six figures. (Agent: Chris Lotts, Ralph M. Vicinanza, Ltd.)

Greg Bear's new novel *Quantico*, a near-future thriller, "pits young FBI agents against a brilliant home-grown terrorist." To sell the book, agent Richard Curtis negotiated a three-way deal with Bookspan's Doubleday Entertainment, Easton Press, and E-Reads. Doubleday Entertainment will issue the original book club publication in the Science Fiction Book Club, Book of the Month Club, Quality Paperback Book Club, Mystery Guild, American Compass, and Military Book Club. Easton will publish a limited edition. E-Reads will publish the trade paperback. (Agent: Richard Curtis, Richard Curtis Associates. Foreign rights agent: Danny Baror, Baror International)

Rachel Caine sold three novels in a "rockin' young adult vampire series" to **Liz Scheier** at NAL. (Agent: Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency)

Adam-Troy Castro sold nonfiction *My Ox Is Broken!: Roadblocks, Detours, Fast Forwards, and Other Great Moments from TV's The Amazing Race* to Benbella Books for late 2006 publication. It "will feature an episode guide, snarky commentary, and interviews with racers who include Jon and Al ("The Clowns") from Race 4, Marshall Hudes from Race 5, and Jonathan Baker from Race 6."

Julie Cochrane sold *Echoes of Monsters*, a new sf novel, to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Chronicle book reviewer **Don D'Amassa** sold mystery novel *Dead of Winter* to Five Star Books.

William C. Dietz sold the latest volumes in his *Legion of the*

Damned series, *When All Seems Lost* and *When Duty Calls*, which chronicle a futuristic army's battles to protect the fragile Confederacy of Sentient Beings from its ruthless enemies, to **Ginjer Buchanan** at Ace. (Agent: Richard Curtis, Richard Curtis Associates)

Dave Duncan sold *Starfolk*, the first novel in "a new fantasy series whose protagonist, searching for his identity, discovers that one of his parents isn't human, which seems to explain why he is in such great demand as an assassin," to **Patrick Nielsen-Hayden** at Tor. (Agent: Richard Curtis, Richard Curtis Associates)

Gary Turner of Golden Gryphon Press bought *A Thousand Deaths*, a collection by the late **George Alec Effinger**. The collection will include the Sandor Courane stories—about a man who experiences terminal illness and untimely death—as well as the out-of-print novel *The Wolves of Memory*, and seven other short stories, only one of which has been reprinted since its original publication. Mike Resnick will write the book's introduction, and Andrew Fox the afterword. Artist John Picacio will provide the full-color, wraparound cover art. (Agent: Richard Curtis, Richard Curtis Associates)

Jennifer Fallon sold the four-book *Tide Lords* series (*The Gods of Anyrantha*, *Palace of Impossible Dreams*, *Tide Watcher*, and *Immortal Requiem*) to **Anna Genovese** at Tor. (Agent: Lyn Trantor, Australian Literary Management. Sub-agent: Jack Byrne, Stemig & Byrne Literary Agency)

Eric Flint sold a new 1632/Ring of Fire anthology, *Grantville Gazette III*, to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Eric Flint & Dave Freer sold a *Sorceress of Karres*, a second sequel to James Schmitz's *Witches of Karres* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Eric Flint & Ryk E. Spoor sold two as-yet-unwritten sequels to *Boundary* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Eric Flint & K.D. Wentworth sold an untitled sequel to *The Course of Empire* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Diana Pharaoh Francis sold three books in her new series *The Crosspointe Chronicles*, "based around the unique island of



K.D. Wentworth

HEADLINES

Crosspointe, center for commerce and conspiracy." (Agent: Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency)

Charlaine Harris & Toni L.P. Kelner will edit the anthology *Many Bloody Returns* for **Ginjer Buchanan** at Ace. Each story will feature a vampire and a birthday, not necessarily the vampire's. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer sold the next installment in their *Year's Best Fantasy* series to Tachyon for trade paperback publication.

Stephen Hunt sold three fantasy novels, starting with *The Court of the Air* to **Sarah Hodgson** at Voyager UK. The novel, described as "an imaginative tour de force, featuring spies, gods, gentlemen assassins and inhuman characters—both villainous and heroic—as well as two engaging young protagonists who each have to discover why their lives are under threat," sold at auction for a high five-figure sum in pounds sterling. Publication is set for 2007. (Agent: John Jarrold)

Nemtoode scientist **John Lambhead** sold his first novel, titled *Lucy in the Sea with Diamonds* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Sarah Monette sold *Mirador* and *Summerdown* (sequels to *Melusine* and *Virtu*) to **Anne Sowards** at Ace. (Agent: Jack Byrne, Sternig & Byrne Literary Agency)

Rosemary Clement Moore sold her first novel, *Prom Dates from Hell*, and its sequel to **Krista Marino** at Delacorte. The series is described as "Veronica Mars meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer." (Agent: Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency)

John Ringo & Travis S. Taylor sold an untitled sf novel to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Spider Robinson sold a new novel, *Very Hard Choices* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen. (Agent: Eleanor Wood, Spectrum Literary Agency)

New author **Cameron Rogers** sold North American rights to *The Music of Razors* to **Tim Mak** at Del Rey. The novel, first published by Penguin Australia, is a fantasy "about a young boy in a corna whose mind and identity have become trapped in the body of an ancient but benign monster. In this form, he struggles to protect his sister from the clutches of an immortal doctor in the employ of a fallen angel." (Agent: Howard Morhaim)

Aaron Rosenberg's second novel, *Day of the Daemon* will be published by Black Library in May 2006. It's the first book in the *Dawn Gate* trilogy, a series of fantasy novels set in Games Workshop's Warhammer world. His first novel, *Exalted 6: The Cornelian Flame* was published by White Wolf Publishing in November; as is set in the world of White Wolf's *Exalted* RPG

Dan Simmons sold his new novel *The Terror* to **Michael Mezzo** of Little, Brown. The novel "evokes Melville and Conrad in this epic story inspired by the terrible and mysterious fates of the crews of two ice-locked 19th century British expeditionary ships." (Agent: Richard Curtis, Richard Curtis Associates)

Wm. Mark Simmons sold *Dead Easy*, a new novel in the Half Life series, to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen. (Agent: Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency)

John C. Wright sold a third untitled sequel to *Orphans of Chaos* to **David Hartwell** at Tor. (Agent: Jack Byrne, Sternig & Byrne Literary Agency)

Books Re-Sold

Charlaine Harris sold reprint rights to her earliest stand-alone mysteries, *Sweet and Deadly* and *A Secret Rage* to **Ginjer Buchanan**

at Ace for their ongoing Berkley Prime Crime reissue program. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Barry Malzberg sold a revised and expanded version of *Breakfast in the Ruins* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen.

Spider Robinson sold reprint rights to *The Callahan Touch* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen. (Agent: Eleanor Wood, Spectrum Literary Agency)

Authors Make Their Deadlines

Scott Mackay turned in *Phytosphere* to **Anne Sowards** at Roc. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Cecilia Tan has delivered the manuscript for *Sex in the System* to **John Oakes** at Thunder's Mouth Press. The anthology of "science fiction stories combining erotic themes with high technology features work by Joe Haldeman, Shariann Lewitt, Scott Westerfeld, Sarah Micklem, and others." Thunder's Mouth, an imprint of Avalon Publishing Group, is scheduled to release it 10 July 2006.

Foreign Rights

Rachel Caine sold Russian language rights to *Ill Wind* and *Heat Stroke* to AST. (Agent: Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency. Co-agent: Konstantin Palchikov)

Simon Green sold French language rights to *Bones of Haven* and *Blue Moon Rising* to Bragelonne. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Simon Green also sold rights to *Deathstalker War* to Wales in the Czech Republic. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

And Germany's Basteri renewed their rights to **Simon Green's** *Deathstalker Honor*. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Elizabeth Moon sold *Against the Odds* to Mondadori in Italy. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Elizabeth Moon also sold *The Speed of Dark* to Neor in Serbia. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Brandon Sanderson sold *Elantris* to Hayakawa in Japan and to BCA in the UK for the book club's winter new author promotion. (Agent: Joshua Bilmes, JABberwocky)

Robert J. Sawyer sold Romanian rights to *Calculating God* to Editura Leda. (Agent: Ralph Vicinanza, Ralph M. Vicinanza, Ltd.)

Martin Scott sold US rights to *Thraxas under Siege* to **Toni Weiskopf** at Baen. It was originally published by Orion in the UK.

Republication

A manga adaptation of **Stephen L. Antezak's** *God Drug* will be serialized in *eigoMANGA's Rumble Pak* magazine starting in March.

LETTERS

We'd like to hear from you about topics, questions, or other items raised by *Chronicle*. Complaints about how few letters we publish are the result of readers not sending letters, instead of our not publishing the ones we get. E-mail us at <chronicle@dnepublications.com>.

January 2006

Dear Ian:

I co-edit the World Fantasy Award winning anthology series *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St. Martin's Press) with Kelly Link & Gavin Grant. We are now reading for the 20th volume, which will include all material published in the year 2006.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the

HEADLINES

traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science fiction horror, psychological horror, or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a *reprint* anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 2006. Submission deadline for *stories* is 15 December 2006. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late. If a magazine, anthology, or collection you're in or you edit is coming out by 31 December 2006, you can send me galleys or manuscripts so that I can judge the stories in time. *No email submissions*. I strongly suggest that authors check with their publishers that they are sending review copies out to me, as I don't have time or energy to nag publishers to get me material. I request it once (maybe twice) and that's it.

There are summations of "the year in horror," and "the year in fantasy" in the front of each volume. These include novels we've read and liked, nonfiction, art books, and in my section, "odds and ends"—material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader. But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. *The deadline for this section is 30 January 2007.*

When sending me material please put *YEAR'S BEST HORROR* on the envelope.

Ellen Datlow, PMB 391, 511 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10011-8436

Kelly Link & Gavin Grant, 176 Prospect Ave, Northampton, MA 01060. Kelly and Gavin cover fantasy and I cover horror. If you consider something both, send a copy to each of us. We do *not* confer on our choices.

I do not want to receive manuscripts from authors of stories from venues that it's likely I already receive regularly (like *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Subterranean*, *Postscripts*, *Weird Tales*, *F&SF*, etc) or from anthologies and collections, unless I don't have or can't get that anthology or collection. And please do *not* send a SASE. If I choose a story you will be informed. If you want to confirm that I've received something, enclose a self-addressed, stamped postcard and I will let you know the date it arrived. For stories that appear on the web, please send me (or have the publisher send me) print-outs of your story.

Ellen Datlow
Editor
www.datlow.com

OBITUARIES

British actor **John Hollis**, aged 74, died 18 October 2005. He appeared in three *Superman* films, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Flash Gordon*.

British author **John Fowles**, aged 79, died 5 November 2005. He novels with genre themes include *The Magus* (1965), *Muse in Mantissa* (1982), and *A Maggot* (1985).

Fan **Irvine Meyer "Papa Irv" Koch**, aged 58, died 18 November 2005. He was one of the founders of Chattanooga and DeepSouthCon. After many years as an industrial engineer, he became a partner in a

Things are Changing by Warren Lapine

As you've probably noticed, this issue of *Science Fiction Chronicle* is combined with *Absolute Magnitude* and is eighty pages—roughly the combined page count of the two magazines, after accounting for the ads that would have been duplicated in both publications. For many of you, this might be the first time you've seen *Science Fiction Chronicle*. If you're not a subscriber to *SFC* or *Absolute Magnitude*, you received this issue because you subscribe to one of their sister magazines (*Dreams of Decadence* or *Fantastic Stories*), and we wanted you to know about some upcoming changes. For the next six to twelve months we plan to combine *SFC* with our fiction magazines on a rotating basis. Next month we'll combine *SFC* with *Dreams of Decadence*, the month after that *SFC* will combine with *Fantastic Stories*, and then we start all over again with *Absolute Magnitude*. If you have a subscription to both *SFC* and the fiction magazine that it is being combined with on any given month, we'll be extending your subscription to the fiction magazine by an issue. That means that regardless of which of our magazines you subscribe to, you'll essentially be getting forty pages of content free each time we send you a magazine.

Why are we doing this? For several reasons. One: We want you to see the other magazines that we publish, in the hope that once you realize just how good they are, you'll subscribe. Two: Frankly, it will allow us to save one set-up fee per magazine. Three: It will allow us to stabilize the publication dates of our fiction magazines. It is important that we get them on a regular schedule once again.

Once we've put out two to four issues of each fiction magazine, we'll include a survey so that you can let us know if you think we should continue combining issues or split the magazines back out.

Next issue John Deakins will be taking over the young adult review column from Mike Jones. I'd like to take a moment to thank Mike for doing such a good job of covering YA books for us. For those of you who would like John to review your YA books please send them to John at John Deakins, HC 37 Box 136, Harrison, AR 65773-9701.

We've also decided that all of the magazines should be more uniform in what we pay our writers. So from here on out all four of our magazines will be paying one to five cents per word on publication for fiction and nonfiction.

That means that *Science Fiction Chronicle* will once again be eligible for the Best Semi-Professional Hugo Award for 2006. We hope you'll consider voting for us when the time comes.

I hope everyone enjoys all of the extra content that you'll be receiving for the next few months. Thank you for sticking with us all these years!

bookstore, and then earned an MS in Library Science from Clark Atlanta University in 2004.

Writer and literary agent **Dan Hooker**, aged 54, died of melanoma on 24 November 2005. Born in Los Angeles, California, he had a MA in Spanish from UCLA. He worked for 11 years with the Ashley Grayson Literary Agency. He discovered Isaac Adamson, Andrew Fox, Barb and JC Hendee, Alan Troop, and Carrie Vaughn, and also represented established authors such as A.E. van Vogt.

Actor **Noriyuki "Pat" Morita** died 24 November 2005. Born 28 June 1932 in Ingleton, California, he was the first Asian-American nominated for an acting Oscar, for his role as Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*. His genre film appearances include *Mulan II*, *The Stoneman*, *Shadow Fury*, *King Cobra*, *Mulan*, *Earth Minus Zero*, *Time Master*, *Babes in Toyland* (the 1986 television version), *Alice in Wonderland* (1985 tv), *Slapstick (of Another Kind)*, and *Full Moon High*. His genre tv appearances include *The Outer Limits*, *Space Rangers*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *The Man from Atlantis*.

HEADLINES

Actress **Wendie Jo Sperber** died of cancer on 29 November 2005. Her age was reported variously as 43, 46, or 47. She appeared as Linda McFly in the first and third *Back to the Future* movies, and had a guest appearance on tv's *Dinosaurs*.

Director **Herbert L. Strook** (no known relation to *Chronicle* news editor Ian Randall Strook), died of heart failure following a car accident on 30 November 2005. Born 13 January 1918 in Boston, Massachusetts, he worked on many creature features in the 1950s. He directed *Witches' Brew* (which he also edited), *The Crawling Hand* (which he also wrote and edited), *Devil's Messenger*, *Men Into Space* (1959 tv series), *How to Make a Monster*, *Sea Hunt* (1958 tv series), *Blood of Dracula*, *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*, *Science Fiction Theater* (1955 tv series), and *Gog* (edited). He edited *Night Screams*, *So Evil My Sister*, *Riders to the Stars*, *Donovan's Brain*, and *The Magnetic Monster*. He wrote *Monster*.

Actor **Jack Colvin**, aged 71, died of a stroke on 1 December 2005. He was best known as reporter Jack McGee in the 1970s tv and film series *The Incredible Hulk*. He also appeared in the genre films *Child's Play*, *Exo-Man*, *The Spell*, *Embryo*, and *The Terminal Man*. He guested on tv series *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Bionic Woman*, and *The Invisible Man*.

Archivist **Dr. Howard Bernard Gotlieb** died of complications following surgery on 1 December 2005. Born 24 October 1926 in Bangor, Maine, he was appointed Director of Special Collections at Boston University in 1963. In this post, he convinced Isaac Asimov of the need to save his papers, notes, letters, etc. for future study. Other collectees he brought to Boston University (and the now renamed Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center) include: Fred Astaire, Bette Davis, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Joan Fontaine, Sue Grafe, David Halberstam, Martin Luther King, Jr., Angela Lansbury, W. Somerset Maugham, John W. McCormack, Dan Rather, and Elie Wiesell.

Film producer **Gregg Hoffman**, aged 42, died suddenly on 4 December 2005. He produced *Saw*, *Saw II*, and the forthcoming *Saw III*.

Horror writer and anthologist **J.N. Williamson** died 8 December 2005. Born 17 April 1932 as Gerald Neal Williamson in Indianapolis, Indiana, he published his first book, *The Illustrious Client's Case Book* (a book of Sherlockiana) in his teens. He began publishing genre stories in the 1960s, and the first of his more than 40 novels, *The Ritual*, was published in 1979. From 1984 through 1991, he edited the *Masques* series of original anthologies. In 2003, the Horror Writers of America gave him a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Author **Robert Shekley**, aged 77, died 9 December 2005. His first collection of short stories was published in 1954 (*Untouched by Human Hands*); other collections include *Citizen in Space* (1955), *Pilgrimage to Earth* (1957), *Is That What People Do?* (1984), and a five-volume set of *Collected Stories* (1991). His first novel, *Immortality, Inc.*, was published in 1958. His *Immortality Delivered* was serialized in 1958-59, and filmed in 1992 as *Freejack*; other novels include *The Status of Civilization* (1960), *Journey Beyond Tomorrow* (1962), *Mindswap* (1966), and *Options* (1975). He served as fiction editor of *Omni* magazine from January 1980 to September 1981, and was named Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in 2001.

Editor **Leona Neyler** died of a post-surgical pulmonary embolism on 10 December 2005. She started her career with Little, Brown in the early 1950s, and then joined Fawcett in 1955. She became vice president and publisher of Fawcett in 1981, but then moved to Ballantine Books, from which she retired, in 2001, as senior vice president and editorial director. At her death, she was a senior editor at Berkley Books.

Comedian/actor **Richard Pryor** died of a heart attack 10 December 2005. Born Richard Franklin Lennox Thomas Pryor III on 1 December

1940 in Peoria, Illinois, he received the Kennedy Center's Mark Twain Prize for humor in 1998. His genre film appearances include *Last Highway*, *Superman III*, *Wholly Moses!*, and *The Wiz*.

Author (**Henry**) **Kenneth Bulmer** died 16 December 2005. Beginning in 1952 he was a prolific writer of space opera and futuristic adventure stories under his own name and many pseudonyms. His most popular series, the Dray Prescott or Kregen sequence, debuted in 1972 as by Alan Burt Akers; DAW published only the first 38 in the series, although it continued in German translation through #53 in 1998. He was also an editor, taking over the British *New Writings in SF* series after founding editor John Carnell died in 1972. Born 14 January 1921 in London, England, Bulmer's full bibliography (listed by pseudonym: he used many) is available at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Bulmer.

Actor **John Spencer** died of a heart attack on 16 December 2005. Best, known as White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry on *The West Wing*, his genre film appearances include *Ravenous* and *War Games*. He had guest appearances in *The Outer Limits*, and *Lois & Clark*.

Children's book author **Margaret Hodges** died 20 December 2005. Born Sarah Margaret Moore on 26 July 1911 in Indianapolis, Indiana, she wrote more than 50 books over a 47-year career. Some of her genre titles include *Merlin and the Making of the King* (Holiday House, 2004), *Gulliver in Lilliput* (Holiday House, 1995), *The Kitchen Knight: A Tale of King Arthur* (Holiday House, 1990), and *Saint George and the Dragon: A Golden Legend* (Little, Brown, 1984), which won a Caldecott Medal.

Character actor **Vincent Schiavelli** died of lung cancer on 26 December 2005. Born 10 November 1948 in Brooklyn, New York, he appeared in about 150 films and television episodes, and also wrote three cookbooks. His genre film appearances include *Snow White* (2001), *Milo, Casper Meets Wendy*, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, *Lord of Illusions*, *Escape to Witch Mountain* (1995), *A Little Princess*, *Lurking Fear*, *Batman Returns*, *Ghost*, *Playroom*, *Bride of Boogey*, *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the 8th Dimension*, *The Return*, and *Angels*. His tv appearances include episodes of *Sabrina*, *the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, *Batman* (1993), *Highlander*, *Eerie, Indiana*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Actor **Patrick Cranshaw** died of natural causes on 28 December 2005. Born 17 June 1919 in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, his genre film appearances include *Herbie: Fully Loaded*, *Alien Avengers II*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Nightmare Honeymoon*, *Mars Needs Women*, *Curse of the Swamp Creature*, and *The Amazing Transparent Man*. His tv guest appearances include *Lois & Clark*, *Quantum Leap*, *Mork & Mindy*, and *Wonder Woman*.

Author **Rona Jaffe**, aged 74, died 30 December 2005. Her genre writings included the 1961 juvenile novel *The Last of the Wizards* and the 1981 novel *Mazes and Monsters*, which attacked the Dungeons & Dragons craze of the 1980s and espoused the idea that RPGs led to more dangerous activities.

SF fan **Howard DeVore** died on 31 December 2005, after a long illness. With Donald Franson he compiled *A History of the Hugo, Nebula, and International Fantasy Awards* in 1978, and was scheduled to have been Guest of Honor at this summer's WorldCon.

Actress **Shelley Winters** died of heart failure on 14 January. Born Shirley Schriff in St. Louis on 18 August 1922, she won two Oscars and appeared on Broadway several times. Her genre film appearances include *Raging Angels*, *Alice in Wonderland* (1985), *The Visitor*, *The Initiation of Sarah*, *Pete's Dragon*, *What's the Matter with Helen?*, *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*, and *The Night of the Hunter*. She guested as "Ma Parker" on an episode of *Batman* in 1966.

CRITICAL MASS

Critical Continued from page 6

writer almost with every book she has written. A little predictable, as is almost all contemporary high fantasy, but you'll be glad you read it.

Starship: Mutiny by Mike Resnick, Pyr, 12/05, \$25, ISBN 1-59102-337-8

It appears that this is the first book in a five novel series, Resnick's take on a popular military SF theme, the unorthodox junior officer who makes good despite the opposition of his superiors, although it has more the feel of Keith Laumer's Retief stories than military SF. Wilson Cole has lost his captain's rank twice and is assigned to a rundown patrol ship in an area distant from the interstellar war humans and their alien allies have been fighting for an indeterminate time. The ship is filled with personnel who have stepped on official toes, and they have moved from boredom to drug addiction and other vices. Cole decides to instill some discipline, but he also finds himself in conflict with his immediate superiors when a series of incidents throws them into the front lines. Cole's success, to say nothing of the rapid succession of opportunities, is implausible, of course, but readers won't much care because Resnick tells such a good story that we ignore the improbability of it all. Four more fun volumes to come.

Burn by James Patrick Kelly, Tachyon, 2005, \$19.95, ISBN 1-892391-27-9

Here's a smart little short novel about dueling philosophies. When a Thoreau enthusiast buys himself an entire planet, he renames it Walden and tries to impose Thoreau's philosophy on the entire population. Not surprisingly, there is considerable resistance and some of that takes the form of non-violent protest, specifically self immolation. As the protestors set themselves on fire, all involved move toward a confrontation. This could easily have become a moderately funny satire, but Kelly treats it quite seriously, questioning whether isolation and ignorance can actually be beneficial to an intelligent species.

The Thousandfold Thought by R. Scott Bakker, Overlook, 1/06, \$26.95, ISBN 1-58567-705-1

The third and final volume in the Prince of Nothing series has more twists and turns than can be found in most entire series. The war is finally moving toward a conclusion, a war that is a blend of political and religious conflicts.

But victory has come at a high price. Sorcery has become a common occurrence. Assassins seek to shift the power structure with clandestine acts of murder. And our hero has begun to have doubts about his own actions and hesitates even as victory seems within his grasp. Large scale events on an even larger stage, complex maneuvers and motivations, and lots of high adventure.

Poison Study by Maria V. Snyder, Luna, 2005, \$19.95, ISBN 0-373-80230-7

I think this is the first hardcover in Harlequin's fantasy romance imprint, and it's by an author I've never heard of. If this is any indication of her writing talent, that's a situation that won't last long. The setting is a more or less familiar fantasy world, although we see it from a relatively confined viewpoint. The protagonist has been convicted and sentenced to death, but she is granted a sort of reprieve if she agrees to act as food taster for the local commander, whose enemies would like nothing better than to poison him. She agrees reluctantly, given no real alternative, but since they don't trust her not to escape, she is also administered a poison for which she must receive a daily antidote or die. Doubly trapped, she becomes increasingly involved in court intrigues and political maneuvering, and discovers a hidden talent of her own. Very nicely told with an unusually complex protagonist.

The Brief History of the Dead by Kevin Brockmeier, Pantheon, 2/06, \$22.95, ISBN 0-375-42369-9

This is the author's fifth novel but his first fantasy, and it's an excellent introduction to the genre. His premise is an original one. The souls of those who have died but who are still remembered by the living are gathered in the City, a limbo like place where they exist until the least memory of them is gone. The author takes us on a tour of the city as seen through the eyes of several of its new residents, alternating their story with that of a still living woman who is trapped in Antarctica and who is herself very near death. Beautifully written and very much unlike anything else in recent fantasy, this should make quite an impression in the fantasy genre if it attracts sufficient attention.

Prodigy by Dave Kalstein, Thomas Dunne, 1/06, \$23.95, ISBN 0-312-34096-6

Thirty years from now, the Stanbury School is a very exclusive training base for children of the rich. Using drugs and advanced techniques,

they manage to turn out a very high ratio of geniuses and prodigies. When someone starts murdering selected graduates of the school, the police miss the connection, although school administrators catch on quickly. Hoping to avoid a scandal, they turn to an amateur private detective to look into the matter. He proves to be more effective than even they anticipated, uncovering a conspiracy with much wider implications. Although constructed as a convoluted mystery, there is a good deal of thinly veiled satire in this first novel.

Raven's Quest by Sharon Stewart, Carolrhoda, 2005, \$15.95, ISBN 1-57505-894-4

I confess that I was only moderately happy with *Watership Down* and haven't really enjoyed any of the other animal fantasies since then except occasional Brian Jacques books. This is another, and as you might guess from the title, the protagonist is a raven, driven from his flock by an unjust accusation, forced to redeem his honor by completing a perilous quest. It's aimed at younger readers, who might find it easier to identify with a bird, and it's certainly not badly written. It's just not my cup of tea, I fear.

The Water Sprites by Emily Rodda, Harper, 2005, \$8.99, ISBN 0-06-077761-6

Although this is part of a series of short adventures for younger readers, it's the first one I've seen. Jessie is the young recurring character who apparently solves a series of problems in a magical land, in this case locating the missing Moon Stone which has the water sprites so angry that they refuse to return anything that comes floating into their territory. It's a cute story with a fairy tale feel to it, and while few adults are likely to find it rewarding in itself, it's a good story to share with a kid.

Trade Paperbacks

The Vampire Genevieve by Jack Yeovil, Black Library, 2005, \$10.99, ISBN 1-84416-244-3

Writing as Jack Yeovil, Kim Newman produced four books set in the Warhammer universe, each featuring his vampire character, Genevieve. All four novels are collected here in one volume. Three are novels and the fourth is a collection of related stories. Genevieve moves through a decadent, post-apocalyptic world. Despite her vampirism, Genevieve is on the side of good – most of the time – and works with various allies to defeat evil wherever it

CRITICAL MASS

arises, even if it is within her own mind. This is some of the best fiction written in this game related universe, and this omnibus volume is a great deal for the cover price.

Battlestar Galactica: The Series by Jeffrey A. Carver, Tor, 2/06, \$14.95, ISBN 0-765-31541-6

I have not seen the new incarnation of this television series, so I have no way of judging the fidelity of this novelization of, presumably, the pilot movie. The premise is basically the same, although in this new version, the cylons are able to create a version of themselves that is indistinguishable from humans, which makes their war of extermination that much more effective. The familiar characters are back—slightly altered of course—and the story holds together a lot better than did the original. Good enough to pique my interest in the show, but not as interesting as Carver's own work.

Perfect Dark Initial Vector by Greg Rucka, Tor, 2005, \$12.95, ISBN 0-765-31571-8

This novel is based on an X-Box computer game called Perfect Dark Zero, which I had never even heard of before. The premise is an old faithful, a future in which corporations rule the world and employ private armies to resolve disputes. The protagonist is a young woman caught in the crossfire, who wields disproportionate influence when she stumbles across a secret that could spell the end of one of the leading corporations. Not badly written, but with nothing particularly new, interesting, or brilliant to hold your attention. As tie-ins go, it's pretty good but that doesn't mean much when you compare it to original SF, even original SF with a similar theme.

Sherlock Holmes and the Coils of Time by Ralph E. Vaughan, Gryphon, 2005, \$16.00, ISBN 1-58250-074-6

Back in 1990, Ralph Vaughan chronicled Sherlock Holmes' fight against the minions of Cthulhu in an amusing and inventive adventure story. Now he returns to tell us what really happened when the anonymous time traveler of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* allowed his time machine to be captured—and initiated—by the predatory Morlocks of the far future, who return to the late 19th Century in search of fresh prey. Although I didn't think this one was as clever as the first, it's still a lot of fun, even though we know what's going on well before the inimitable detective, who is investigating a series of missing persons reports in London.

Future Washington edited by Ernest Lilley, WSFA Press, 2005, \$16.95, ISBN 0-9621725-4-5

Ten years ago, David Alexander Smith edited an interesting anthology called *Future Boston*. Now the nation's capital gets the same treatment in this new and equally fine collection, featuring stories by Kim Stanley Robinson, Allen Steele, Cory Doctorow, Sean McMullen, Jack McDevitt, Jane Lindskold, and several others. One common thread is one which Robinson has used in his recent novel, *Fifty Degrees Below*, in that global warming and rising sea levels have swamped portions of Washington. Doctorow, Robinson, and Steele have the best of a very good selection of stories.

Zanesville by Kris Saknussemm, Villard, 2005, \$14.95, ISBN 0-8129-7416-6

First novelist Saknussemm strikes me as an amalgam of Kurt Vonnegut, Tom De Haven, and half a dozen other satirists. Unfortunately, satire has not done well in SF for the past decade or two, which perhaps explains why this zany novel is packaged for a mainstream audience. The protagonist may or may not be a mutant. What is certain is that he has lost his memory and has come under the influence of a group of strange characters who are battling a megacorporation which will do whatever is necessary, legal or illegal, to quash its enemies. He sets out on a cross country odyssey, accompanied by a variety of characters including two who are holograms brought to physical life. Obviously the story cannot be taken entirely seriously, but the underlying themes can, and there are portions of the novel which veer away from humor into more serious themes, sometimes jarringly so. Definitely a book that will shake you out of your settled reading habits.

Disappearing Nightly by Laura Resnick, Luna, 2005, \$13.95, ISBN 0-373-80233-1

Luna is the fantasy imprint of Harlequin and the novels have been, by and large, fantasy romances, although usually with the emphasis on the fantasy rather than the romance. With a few exceptions, their offerings have been quite good and certainly designed to appeal to an audience wider than just romance readers, although that's a pretty good sized audience all by itself. This new addition by Laura Resnick is a contemporary fantasy about an actress who finds herself among a company who are, quite literally, disappearing into thin air. Is she going to be the next, or can she solve the mystery and uncover the magical talent responsible? Sea-

soned by a good measure of humor, this fantasy mystery is one of the best titles Luna has issued, and a genuine treat for readers of any genre.

Brigid's Quest by P.C. Cast, Luna, 2005, \$13.95, ISBN 0-373-80242-0

This new fantasy romance novel has an unusual protagonist. Brigid Dhianna is a young warrior, but she's also a centaur. Brigid is unhappy about the belligerent attitude of her people and has gone to make a new place for herself among humans. When she is maneuvered into returning to her homeland for a visit, she discovers that she is the focus of magical events including the intervention of a goddess and the development of her own magical talents, two factors which could change not only her life but alter the relationship between the human and centaurs tribes forever. Well written and occasionally inventive, but I was never able to develop much fondness or sympathy for the protagonist.

Parish Danned by Lee Thomas, Telos, 2005, \$8.95, ISBN 1-84583-040-7

This is a novella of the supernatural, which opens more strongly than it concludes. The people of Coral Point are hit every few years with a mysterious and perhaps fatal disease, and those who contract it are rumored to have gone into the sea to commit suicide and avoid the unpleasant death that awaits them. But this year things are going to change because an outsider wants answers and the answers involve something far worse than a small plague. Well written but the conclusion wasn't satisfying.

The Singer's Crown by Elaine Isaak, Eos, 10/05, \$14.95, ISBN 0-06-078253-6

First novelist Isaak gives a slightly new twist to an old fantasy theme, the usurped throne and efforts to restore the rightful ruler. The catch this time is that the proper heir has been mutilated in such a fashion that he cannot hope to succeed. Or can he? Exiled and working as a bard, he falls in love with a princess of another kingdom which also faces a potential overthrow, and the two of them must find the strength to save both their lands, defeat evil magic, and regain their place in the world. There's more than a touch of romance mixed in with the considerable politicking. The story might have benefited from a little more action and a little less talking, but it's not a major problem and on the whole this is a pleasant and promising debut.

CRITICAL MASS

***Emerald Eye* edited by Frank Ludlow and Roelof Goudriaan, Aeon, 2005, £6.99, ISBN 0-9534784-4-0**

In this sampler of modern Irish fantastic fiction, we have everything from SF to fantasy to horror. All eighteen stories have been previously published, several from *Albedo One*, an Irish fiction magazine. The list of contributors includes Anne McCaffrey, Bob Shaw, and James White, along with a roster of less well known writers, several of whom are quite good. Most of the stories are generic and have no obvious Irish flavor, but it's a pleasant mix and there are no bad stories. Here's a good opportunity to sample some writers whose names aren't well known on this side of the Atlantic.

***Memories of Empire* by Django Wexler, Medallion, 2005, \$14.99, ISBN 1932815147**
Django Wexler debuts with an ambitious fantasy novel set in the ruins of an empire. The story alternates among several groups of characters, each caught up in their own quests or troubles, each unaware that they are part of an elaborate game played by superhuman powers. The story is well told for the most part and there are some interesting characters and situations, particularly the introduction of a ghost-like character, and my only real complaint is that at times the dialogue seemed rather artificial. It's a good adventure story with a few twists that will probably catch you by surprise.

Mass Market Paperbacks

***Hate – Kill – Repeat* by Jason Arnoopp, Black Flame, 2005, \$7.99, ISBN 1-84416-271-0**

***Death Moon* by Alex S. Johnson, Black Flame, 2005, \$7.99, ISBN 1-84416-273-7**
These two movie tie-ins show the diverging threads of the Friday the 13th Films. The first title is closer to the original movies. Two serial killers decide that Jason is a kindred spirit, so they journey to Crystal Lake to join forces. Unfortunately for them, Jason doesn't like competition, or partners. The second title, which is less plausible but paradoxically more interesting, follows Jason into the future. Jason has been revived and fortified with advanced technology, but he still doesn't follow instructions or work well with others, and he goes on a rampage at an exclusive girls' school on the moon. The first book is considerably better written, but doesn't have as many amusing incidents as the other.

***Protege* by Tim Waggoner, Black Flame, 2005, £6.99, ISBN 1-84416-255-9**

***Dead Man's Hand* by Steven A. Roman, Black Flame, £6.99, ISBN 1-84416-177-3**
Two more horror film tie-ins from an imprint specializing in that form. The first is a Nightmare on Elm Street novel, in which Freddy Krueger takes on an apprentice of sorts, but as usually happens in these cases, the apprentice gets ideas of his own and has to be dealt with. This was actually quite well written and I always thought this was the only really intelligent slasher film franchise, although it has had its ups and downs. The second is based on *The Final Destination*, whose premise is that death is a physical force and that if you avoid death through prescience, it comes looking for you. The concept is interesting but very limited and the novels in this series – of which this is the fourth – have tended to follow very much the same pattern. Some of the death scenes are cleverly done, but there's nothing new here at all.

***Operation Vampyr* by David Bishop, Black Flame, 2005, £6.99, ISBN 1-84416-274-5**

This is the opening volume in the Fiends of the Eastern Front trilogy, set during World War II. The protagonist is a German participating in the invasion of Russia who discovers that some of the Romanian troops fighting alongside the Germans are actually vampires. Horrified, he switches sides, intending to alert the Russians to the danger, but the vampires are determined to protect their secret. There's some possibly unintentional humor mixed into this blend of the horrors of war and the horrors of the undead. Bishop is a workmanlike writer who manages to keep even the most implausible situations sounding as though they might really happen.

***Guardians of the Forest* by Graham MacNeill, Black Library, 2005, \$7.99, ISBN 1-84416-235-4**

***Death's City* by Sandy Mitchell, Black Library, 2005, \$7.99, ISBN 1-84416-240-0**
These are both longish fantasy novels set in the Warhammer universe. The first is more Tolkienesque than usual in this series. A knight forges an unusual alliance with an elf to help defend a magical forest from invasion by a hostile force. I've enjoyed some of MacNeill's earlier Warhammer novels, but this one just never caught my attention. The Mitchell title is a sequel to his earlier *Death's Messenger*. This

time the fugitives are pursued by witch hunters and others and take refuge in a major city, hoping to lose themselves among the throng. Naturally it doesn't work. Nicely mysterious at times but not enough to slow the story down.

***Junktion* by Matthew Farrer, Black Flame, 2005, \$6.99, ISBN 1-84416-241-9**

Fourth in the Necromunda series, which I believe is based on a role playing game. The setting is a decadent, crime ridden megalopolis of the future, overpopulated and teetering on the brink of chaos. As law and order recedes and chaos threatens to sweep over one portion of that city, a professional lamplighter realizes that someone is systematically murdering people in his profession, which means he'd better solve the mystery before he becomes the next victim. A nicely realized, though unpleasant, setting and a reasonably good mystery.

***Liar's Peak* by Robin D. Laws, Black Library, 2005, \$7.99, ISBN 1-84416-233-8**

***The Broken Lance* by Nathan Long, Black Library, 2005, \$6.99, ISBN 1-84416-243-5**

The Warhammer fantasy universe continues to spin off subsets, some of which are quite good sword and sorcery adventures. These two are cases in point. The first is an Angelika Fleischer novel, whose protagonist has the unlikely profession of being a battlefield looter, although sometimes what she finds is not exactly what she was looking for. Finally having saved enough to support herself, she contemplates retiring from the business, but when someone steals her life savings just as a fresh round of fighting is about to start, she has to rethink her priorities. Not quite as good as its predecessors, but the protagonist is a unique and interesting one. The second title is much action oriented, part of the Blackhearts sequence. This one is more traditional, with a group of outcasts organized into a military unit and sent to investigate the strange goings on at one military post. Is it corruption or evil magic? Lighter weight and predictable, but still fun.

***A Fistful of Strontium* by Jaspre Bark and Steve Lyons, Black Flame, 2005, \$6.99, ISBN 1-84416-270-2**

***Bringers of Death* edited by Marc Gascoigne and Christian Dunn, Black Library, 2005, \$6.99, ISBN 1-84416-232-X**
A couple of books from the fringes of SF here. The first is apparently related to a game system called 2000 AD and is a Strontium Ace adventure. Johnny Alpha is a bounty hunter who

CRITICAL MASS

pursues his latest quarry to a planet populated almost entirely by mutants and where no one is exactly whom they seem. Wacky, occasionally funny, and very implausible adventure, but I found myself enjoying this one despite all its faults, remembering how much I enjoyed similar books back in the 1960s. The second title is a collection of Warhammer stories mostly set in space and involving the battles between the forces of good and evil. The contributors are all Warhammer regulars but the only one I enjoyed particularly was the one by Simon Jowett.

***The Dragon's Revenge* by Irene Radford, DAW, 11/05, \$6.99, ISBN 0-7564-0317-0**

I don't generally care for novels that blend SF and magic unless they're humorous, as is the case with Christopher Stasheff for example, so I've had intermittent trouble enjoying this series, the Stargods, of which this is the third. Fugitive brothers take refuge on a remote planet where they become revered for their efforts to free the people from domination by a kind of weredragon. Their offworld enemies have followed them as well, so they're caught between multiple enemies. And more are on the way. Radford always writes well and this is no exception, but it's more likely to appeal to fantasy fans than those who prefer SF.

***Midnight in Death* by J.D. Robb, Berkley, 2005, \$2.99, ISBN 0-425-20881-8**

Yes, that price is right. This is actually a reprint of a 1998 novella from an anthology called *Silent Night*, so it's a comparatively early adventure of Eve Dallas. A brilliant by psychotic serial killer has escaped from prison and returned to Earth and New York City to track down and torture to death everyone involved in his incarceration, including Dallas herself. All of the usual characters show up, as the body count rises and fresh strains appear between Dallas and her husband, Roarke, although everything is smoothed over in the end. I'd like to see more books of this length – and price – because novellas are perfect for a free hour or so.

***The Oklahoma Kid* by Stephen King, Leisure, 2005, \$5.99, ISBN 0-8439-5584-8**

Horror master Stephen King interrupted his retirement from writing to pen this short entry in Leisure's new hardcase crime series, although it really doesn't seem to fit under that label. The story consists of a conversation among between two elderly residents of a small town on an island off the coast of Maine with

their young employee, a woman reporter who finds life there surprisingly appealing. They tell her of an incident more than twenty years previous in which a man was found dead under mysterious circumstances. The reader is warned right up front that the story isn't complete and that there aren't going to be any real answers to the questions, but even with that warning, the inconclusive ending is unsatisfying. The mystery is actually a pretty good one, but without a solution, it remains an interesting but rather frustrating oddity.

***Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Letters* by Brian Froud and Ari Berk, Abrams, 2005, \$19.95, ISBN 0-8109-5788-4**

***Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book* by Brian Froud with Terry Jones, Abrams, 2005, \$24.95, ISBN 0-8109-5942-9**

The first title is a supplement to the second, originally published in 1995, now enhanced with, among other things, a DVD containing an interview and other material. Both books are essentially art books, cast in the form of reproductions of pressed fairies, that is, fairies captured and preserved – flat – under glass. The pictures are cute and the accompanying text is amusing. The perfect books to set out on a coffee table and snag unsuspecting mundane guests with.

***Time After Time* edited by Denise Little, DAW, 11/05, \$7.50, ISBN 0-7564-0310-3**

This is a pretty good original anthology, collecting sixteen stories of SF and fantasy, all involving either time travel or alternate history, everything from vampires to John Lennon. Many of the stories are quite good, including those by Ray Vukcevic, Sarah Hoyt, Laura Resnick, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch (who has a second under a pseudonym). The one unsettling bit about the book is the price, which seems to indicate another step up, particularly for a 300 page anthology. With the price of so many other items rising dramatically this year, I'm beginning to wonder if the mass market paperback is headed for hard times.

***Gilfeather* by Glenda Larke, Ace, 11/05, \$7.99, ISBN 0-441-01348-1**

The second volume in the Isles of Glory trilogy sees our three adventurers – a man exiled from his own people, a female warrior, and another capable of casting illusions – continuing their quest to defeat a

malevolent sorcerer. Their efforts take an unexpected turn in this middle volume, setting the stage for the final confrontation. Larke is a capable writer who creates lifelike characters and some interesting situations but who rarely ventures away from the standard devices of contemporary fantasy. Her trio of protagonists has potential, however, and the third volume may prove to be the best.

***Dispatch* by Bentley Little, Signet, 10/05, \$7.99, ISBN 0-451-21677-6**

Bentley Little's newest almost got past me because the local bookstore didn't shelve it in the horror section. Like most of his previous work, it centers on what appears to be a rather mundane part of the contemporary world. The protagonist spends much of his life writing letters, for which he has an unprecedented talent. He can complain to manufacturers and earn himself free gifts and other letters, more personal ones, can actually influence the emotions and actions of the people who receive them. The term "man of letters" takes on a whole new meaning in his case. But his extraordinary talent attracts the attention of someone else, someone who recruits him as an employee. Unfortunately, he finds himself working for an evil force powerful enough to consume even him, and his boss doesn't look favorably on resignations, no matter how well written. This was easily the best, and most seductive, of Little's recent novels.

***Windfall* by Rachel Caine, Roc, 11/05, \$7.99, ISBN 0-451-46057-X**

The fourth book of the Weather Warden has our protagonist on the skids. Although her physical form has been recreated, she has lost her magical ability to control the weather and there's a major split in the hidden magical forces of the world which might find her caught in the middle. As if that wasn't bad enough, she has a host of mundane problems to deal with as well, not the least of which is her sister who arrives with a new boyfriend at the worst possible time. Caine has created an interesting fantasy background for this series, set in our contemporary world, incorporating both djinns and European magical traditions. Each of her adventures has read smoothly and pleasantly and I look forward to her next.

CRITICAL MASS

Kris Longknife: Defiant by Mike Shepherd, Ace, 11/05, \$7.99, ISBN 0-441-01349-X

One of the problems I have with much recent military SF is that the authors seem to have little imagination, or are just unwilling to take a chance on something out of the ordinary. The device of having a low ranking, usually at least mildly disgraced officer suddenly thrust into a leadership position and becoming an incredible hero can be done well – and has been, as in David Feintuch's *Seafort* series – but after a while it becomes so predictable and familiar that it doesn't engage the reader, no matter how well written. That's the case for me with the third adventure of Kris Longknife, who finds herself trapped into taking charge of the defenses of a planet under siege despite her theoretical inability and lack of authority to do so. And naturally she saves the day. If you aren't already tired of this plot, this is a good buy because the story is well told, but if you've already overdone on Honor Harrington, you might want to look in another direction.

Berserk by Tim Lebbon, Leisure, 1/06, \$6.99, ISBN 0-8439-5430-2

This is the first mass market edition of what is certainly Lebbon's best book to date. The protagonist is frustrated by the events surrounding his son's death. Military authorities insist he died in a training accident, but he suspects the sealed coffin doesn't really contain the body. His investigation leads him to a mass grave which he excavates, but what he finds is something out of his worst nightmare – and something that might well slip into yours. I don't want to give away too much but this is a superb and shocking horror novel, and definitely not for those with weak stomachs. The child character, Natasha, is particularly memorable.

Associational

Flames of Damnation edited by Marc Gascoigne and Christian Dunn, Black Library, \$9.99, ISBN 1-84416-253-2

Daemonifuge: Heretic Saint by Ken Walker, Gordon Rennie, et al, Black Library, 2005, \$9.99, ISBN 1-84416-251-6

Both of these volumes are collections of black and white graphic stories set in the Warhammer universe. Warhammer incorporates sword and sorcery and space opera in a rather improbable combination, and both of these titles concentrate more on the latter than the former. The forces of Chaos send armies to conquer the worlds of humanity, opposed by space marines and other forces raised against them. On the other hand, the invaders can call upon the supernatural to aid them. All of the stories in both collections are primarily action or battle scenes. The artwork is considerably better in the second volume, but the writing is about the same in both.

The Horus Heresy Vol III: Visions of Treachery by Alan Merrett, Black Library, 2005, \$29.99, ISBN 1-84416-247-8

The Sabbat Worlds Crusade by Dan Abnett, Black Library, 2005, \$29.99, ISBN 1-84416-249-4

Both of these are tie-ins to the Warhammer universe. The first is essentially an art book, third in a series collecting full color paintings associated with an interstellar war between good and evil. More than twenty artists are represented here and although the subject matter is often repetitive, the styles vary considerably. The second title is more interesting, a companion volume to Abnett's subset of Warhammer, the Sabbat novels. There is considerably more text in this one, which is written as a kind of history of the conflict, summarizing battles and tactics. There's a good deal of art here as well, including maps and photographs. The art isn't as overwhelming in this case, and fans of the series should find this an interesting reading experience as well as a visual one. The latter is also bound in a heavy, transparent plastic cover unlike anything I've ever seen on a book before.

The Life of Sigmar, Black Library, 12/05, \$19.99, ISBN 1-84416-250-8

Here's another tie in to the Warhammer universe, in this case tending toward the barbaric fantasy end of its spectrum. Cast in the form of a non-fiction book, it details the life of the warrior-god Sigmar and the early days of the empire which he founded. There are anecdotes, histories, and a good number of black and white illustrations.

Nothing to appeal to those not interested in the Warhammer universe, though.

Mapping the World of Harry Potter edited by Mercedes Lackey, BenBella, 1/06, \$14.95, ISBN 1-932100-59-8

This is a collection of essays about the Harry Potter books, obviously, including contributions from Lawrence Watt-Evans, James Gunn, Roberta Gellis, Sarah Zettel, Adam-Troy Castro, and several others, examining various aspects of Rowling's creation. Gunn's commentary on the revival of the schoolboy novel was particularly interesting, and Bruce Bethke's was quite amusing. Some of the essays are at least partly tongue in cheek, but they're all well written. This is probably one of the best of the many books likely to appear on this subject in the near future.

Worlds by Alec Gillis, DesignStudio Press, 2005, no price listed, ISBN 0-9726676-9-3

There have been a number of books about alien ecosystems in the past, usually consisting of many paintings and some accompanying text. This is another, but instead of paintings the author has used both paintings and photographs, depicting the lifeforms on a variety of imaginary worlds. There are some nifty shots here and some of the creatures look quite realistic. The author works in special effects in Hollywood, so the effectiveness of the presentation is not surprising. The kind of book you leave around for people to look through with raised eyebrows.

Star Wars: The Ultimate Visual Guide by Ryder Windham, DK, 2005, \$24.99, ISBN 0-7566-1420-1

The Star Wars movie franchise has produced a virtual library of tie-ins, novels and non-fiction, of which this is one of the more impressive. It consists of numerous full color pictures, stills, production shots, and so forth associated with all six of the movies, plus others that provide a wider overview, or cover models, movie posters, comic books, video games, and other merchandise. There are also a handful of full color drawings and a timeline showing major developments in the production of the films. Attractively packaged and presented, with occasional interesting tidbits in the text, but it's primarily a picture book.

SF CINEMA

SF Cinema continued from page 8
ghost until he meets a real one.

Star Wars fans travel across country with one of their number, who is dying, to honor his greatest wish: to see *The Phantom Menace* in the 'perfect' setting, at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch. Newcomer Kyle Newman directs from a script by Adam F. Goldberg and Ernest Cline.

The rights to *Stoneheart*, a children's novel by screenwriter Charlie Fletcher, have been bought by Paramount. Fletcher will adapt his own tale about a child who accidentally knocks the head from a statue in London's Imperial War Museum, which causes the stone serpents that adorn the museum to come to life. A soldier's statue turns human and rescues the boy – after which the city is besieged by statues coming-to-life.

The eleventh film in the *Friday the 13th* series will be released on October 13 this year. With a script by Mark Wheaton, it will recount the origins of the murderous Jason Voorhees. The last flick with 'hockey-masked killer was *Freddy vs. Jason* in 2003.

John Cusack will star in the film version of Stephen King's *1408*, about the supernatural things that happen when he checks into that hotel room. The script is by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski.

Leo Gregory, Eva Birthistle and Margo Stilley star in *Reverb*, which marks the directorial debut of screenwriter Eitan Arusi (*Long Time Dead*). It's about a rock musician who is locked in a recording studio overnight with his band. When they sample an old record with a voice hidden in the track, the band literally raises hell.

Universal Pictures will be filing Christian Gossett's comic book *The Red Star*, about an alternate-reality Soviet Union ruled by technology and militarized sorcery. The picture will be made by Timur Bekmambetov (*Night Watch*).

Nathan Fillion (*Serenity*) and Katee Sackhoff (*Battlestar Galactica*) will star in *White Noise 2: The Light*, in which a man returns from the edge of death with the ability to identify those who are soon to die. Patrick Lussier directs from Matt Venne's script.

Escape From Planet Earth – a CGI film

about aliens who bust free from Area 51 – is being written by Cory Edwards, Todd Edwards, and Tony Leech with the first Mr. Edwards directing.

Rocker Marilyn Manson is about to begin what he calls a "gothic psychological horror film." Called *Phantasmagoria: the Visions of Lewis Carroll*, it's a surreal look at the author's life.

Amber Tamblyn will play the younger sister of Sarah Michelle Gellar's character in *The Grudge 2*. Gellar returns briefly to pass along the curse.

Andrew Adamson will direct *Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, slated for release during the Christmas season, 2007. To date, the first film has earned \$637.8 million internationally.

The makers of *The Blair Witch Project* haven't been doing much since the doomed sequel. Now, co-director Ed Sanchez is finishing up the horror flick *Altered* while Dan Myrick is about to start the chiller *Solstice*.

Planet One is coming from writer Joe Stillman (*Shrek*). The \$50 million CGI film is about an alien race that fears a human invasion.

Jim Agnew and Sean Keller's script *Damned* is coming to the silver screen. It's about an American family that survives a plane crash only to be hunted by demon-fearing fanatics.

Eddie Murphy will be starring in *Starship Dave* for director Peter Segal (*The Longest Yard*). It's about tiny humanoid aliens who are trying to find a way to save their doomed planet.

Gabor Csupo will direct *Bridge to Terabithia* for Walt Disney, based on the 1978 novel by Katherine Peterson. Josh Hutcherson and Anna-Sophia Robb star as two 'outsider' classmates who create a fantasy kingdom as an escape. Jeff Stockwell wrote the script.

Hood vs. Evil will be the sequel to the surprise CGI-animated *Little Red Riding Hood* tale, *Hoodwinked*.

Prehistoric fish released by an earth tremor into Arizona's Lake Havasu is the plot of the remake of the 1978 film *Piranha*. Chuck Russell (*The Mask*) will direct from his own script.

Not surprisingly, the latest film in the

venerable series, *Omen 666*, will open 6/6/06.

Grind House will feature two sixty-minute horror films: *Death Proof* directed by Quentin Tarantino and *Planet Terror* from Robert Rodriguez.

The Slave Labor Graphics comic book *Ghouly Boys* will be filmed by Mandate Pictures. Created by 'Christopher,' the comic book is about four gentle young monsters – a wolf lad, sea monster, zombie, and boogeyman (plus their pet bat who has trouble flying) – who find it difficult to fit in with mainstream society.

Robin Williams will be playing Theodore Roosevelt in *Night at the Museum*, in which night watchman Ben Stiller finds that many of the exhibits have come to life thanks to the curse of a pharaoh's tablet.

Sandra Bullock stars in *Premonition*, about a woman whose husband dies in a car accident – then shows up the next day. Kate Nelligan, Nia Long and Amber Valletta costar for director Mennan Yapo.

No one is attached to direct or star in the flick, but Dimension Films has bought John Unholz's superhero spoof *Comic Book*, which does to the genre what *Scary Movie* did to horror.

Imelda Staunton and Evanna Lynch were among the new Hogwarts students when director David Yates began shooting *Harry Potter* and *The Order of the Phoenix* in February. Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson reprise their starring roles in the fifth film of the blockbuster series.

British horror film firm Amicus Entertainment is back. The refinanced company will remake films in the \$5 to \$20 range beginning with *The House That Dripped Blood* and including *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Beast Must Die*, *Scream and Scream Again*, and *Torture Garden*. The company will also make original features beginning with *Clown*, about an evil clown and his dwarf partner who work at a rundown carnival. The film will be written and directed by Mark Jones (*Leprechaun*). Also upcoming is *Stuck* from director Stuart Gordon (*Re-Animator*), about a young hit-and-run driver whose fate is linked to that of her victim

Continued on page 74

Down to The Tethys Sea

by Stephen Dedman

Copyright © Stephen Dedman 2006

It was a beautiful day, and I reached into the bait box for a fresh trilobite. Thom was doing a monograph on the blasted things and collecting potloads of them, then rejecting all the unremarkable specimens. I'd promised to return them to the sea, and I was: I grabbed one of the largest, and put a hook through it quickly before it could roll up into a ball, then cast off.

The Tethys sea is possibly the ideal place for fishing. The weather is warm, the air breathable, there are no flies or mosquitoes or other annoying winged insects (much less seagulls, which I've never liked), and while not all the fish are edible and most of those that are taste pretty much the same and rot even more quickly than uptime fish, the smartest of them are about as stupid as sharks. Sure, Devonian days are short and my circadians had taken a battering when I'd first arrived - I was timesick for close to a month - but I hadn't much else to do, especially when the sun was up. I stared at the moon while I waited for a nibble; it was smooth and clear enough to be the sun, but larger.

Something tugged at the line and I reeled in an ammonite - about half a metre of shell and a few mouthfuls of decent calamari, but better than nothing, so I bagged it and baited the hook with another trilobite.

The sun was low in the sky, the bag nearly empty and my eyes half-closed when the phone chimed in my head. "Long." I muttered.

"You'd better come in," said Green. "It looks as though we'll be having company for dinner."

"What?" As I said, I wasn't completely awake.

"The machine's started glowing, but nothing's come through yet. That means a -"

"I know what it means. Okay, I'll head back now." We weren't expecting anyone else, and we didn't even have another bed set up. I hoped the newcomer would at least have the grace to bring some wine.

It took me nearly twenty minutes to get back to the station, and I took a minute out to drop my catch - a metre-long rhipidistian that had put up a reasonable fight, a *Cheirolepis*, a couple of antiarchs (scarcely worth the effort) and a *Stethacanthus*, as well as the ammonite - into Thom's lab, which also served as the kitchen. Thom was sitting behind the bench, looking seriously stunned. "What's up?"

"It's the new arrival," she replied, without looking at me.

"What about her? Was she hurt or something?"

"He's male."

"Male? What're they doing, sending a male here?"

"I don't know. He's still unconscious."

"Are you sure he's male?"

"I am a zoologist," she replied, archly. "Just because I've specialised in trilobites doesn't mean I don't know a man when I see one."

I apologised. "They could at least have warned us." I've nothing against men in the sciences, but women usually work better when there aren't any around. Besides, I couldn't see why a man would want to come *here*, where there was really only work for astronomers and biologists, neither of them traditionally male fields of expertise... "Maybe he's a geologist," I suggested, a moment later. "Lots of men study geology, and there hasn't been a geologist here since Smith and that was what, two or three years ago?"

Thom nodded. "I've sent a request uptime for some supplies for him; maybe they can tell us who he is while they're at it. What did you catch?"

Dinner was excellent - slabs of *Stethacanthus* and salad - but no-one seemed to be enjoying it. (I sometimes wish for something we could serve with a nice claret, but the only red meat between here and the Triassic is us.) Our unexpected visitor remained unconscious, and we couldn't expect a reply from Alpha Station until morning. As soon as I'd eaten my fill, I retreated to the observatory. My telescope was small - any hometime university with a good astronomy faculty would probably have a larger one - but between us, we'd done a catalogue of every body more than five clicks long between here and Jupiter, and spotted four comets and a nova. I measured the albedo of Iapetus until Saturn set, told the scope to follow Jupiter, and went to bed - to discover that Miller, the ichthyologist and closest we had to a medic, had put our unexpected visitor in it without consulting me. I took a deep breath, turned around, and went back out to watch the sky.

Alpha replied to our message shortly before sunrise, telling us that they hadn't sent us anyone or anything. Our visitor woke nearly two hours later. Green tried to question him, and discovered that he spoke no Europic, nor any other language we recognised. The kube picked out a few words that sounded like Egyptian, but that might have been coincidence.

Our medical scans had shown only that he was human and healthy, apart from serious timesickness - nothing that would cause aphasia. After half an hour, we were fairly confident that we knew his name - Daniel Kaminsky - and he knew ours, and we could say "Who are you?" and "Where am I?" and count to ten in each other's mother tongue. The kube was running a Rosetta program, designed to decipher alien languages; as far as I knew, this was the first practical test it had ever received, and it was anyone's guess how long it would take.

Absolute Magnitude

The station was built mostly of spray stone, the walls and floors carpeted with mood moss, the ceiling painted stone, the windows and skylights prismatic - spartan, I suppose, especially with most of the rooms being scarcely four metres across their long axes, but we had no idea what our visitor was accustomed to. Unfortunately, as this was my room, it was also untidy, with my books and some of my fishing gear and my few clothes piled seemingly at random (well, I knew where everything was), and the only decorations a holo of the statue of Cassandra from the Women's Academy, and a certificate from the Gondwana Trout Fishing Preservation Society, both on my desk. When our attempt at conversation finally ran aground, the visitor slowly raised himself from the bed and carefully walked over to the desk. He picked up a handful of books, reading their labels, looked at the holo curiously, and then stared at the certificate. His eyes brightened, then he began pointing to some of the larger letters. "Alpha," he said, in his strange accent. "Beta. Gamma. Delta. Epsilon." He hesitated, then looked at us curiously. We smiled back. "Well, at least he knows the alphabet," said Fox, softly.

"So we have some history in common." I glanced at his clothes; people had been wearing denim jeans for centuries, and his jacket and boots were also unremarkable, apart from the lettering on them. Some of the letters looked like ours, others didn't, but the numbers were recognisable. He'd arrived with nothing but this clothing, not even a wrist kube, and the scan had picked up no implants apart from some small metal lumps in his teeth. He was taller than any of us, nearly 180 centimetres, and weighed seventy kilos; his skin was slightly darker than Miller's, but fairer than Green's; his hair and eyes were dark brown; and his blood was type A+, none of which told us much about his ancestry. His hair was short for a man's, his beard looked as though he hadn't had it long, and I guessed his age at just under thirty. I asked the kube to project a globe of the hometime world; he nodded, and pointed at a point on the east coast of America, then at himself. We each pointed out our birthplaces, then I asked for a globe of the current world. He studied this intently, then walked unsteadily back to my bed.

After showing him how to use the toilet, we left him alone for a few hours and drew the curtain to give him some privacy. It occurred to me that we had no idea of our visitor's taboos, but no-one had ever told us we'd need anthropology in the Devonian. Green and Fox disappeared into Fox's room to make love, leaving the rest of us to confer in the dining room.

"Is it just me, or do you wish some of these rooms had doors?" murmured Thom.

I shrugged. The exterior doors only existed to keep out the weather; we were too far from the beach and the swamps to have to worry about anything wandering in. "We can tell the kube to wake us if he leaves the room," I said, "if you think it's important."

"Doesn't he make you nervous?"

"Why?" I turned to Miller. "What about you?"

"I can understand your concern," Miller said to Thom. "We know almost nothing about him - but he's not diseased, and there's no reason to believe he's violent. Even if he were, he's too timesick to be much of a threat, though I agree that having the kube keep track of his movements is a good idea. But I wish I knew where and when he's from; I don't like the idea that he's from further uptime than we are, far enough that Europic may be a dead language, but that's the obvious conclusion. In any case, he shouldn't be here for long; all the anthropologists and linguists uptime will want to study him, we'll be asked to send him back as soon as he's healthy enough to travel."

To our astonishment, Miller was wrong. Alpha Station not only asked us to keep the visitor, but not to travel ourselves, in case there was something wrong with the machine. Apart from the message, they sent us some linguistics programs for the kube and some clothing for Kaminsky, all of which came through without any problems. Green and I examined the machine as best we could without activating it, without finding anything obviously wrong with either the platform or the projector, but that didn't prove anything; fixing the hoverover is about my limit. The next day, I noticed a laser torch missing from the rack, and later found it next to Thom's bed, set to narrow beam and full power pulse. After a moment's indecision, I left it there.

Kaminsky quickly learnt the rudiments of Europic from the kube, with help from Miller and I, and the kube learnt even more of his language, which Kaminsky called 'English', and was soon able to act as an interpreter. With its usual literal-mindedness, it translated any word from our language into its English equivalent and vice versa, even our names. Fox, Green and Miller found new enthusiasm for their research, while I must admit I began neglecting mine.

Three days after Kaminsky's arrival, I showed him around as much of the station as wasn't hidden behind curtains; two days later, Thom decided he was well enough to be shown the outside world, so I took him for a ride on the hoverover with a pocket-kube acting as our interpreter. He seemed delighted with the carpet of club mosses, and the towering horsetails and fern trees. "I was expecting to be sent back to the Ordovician - nearly half a billion years, no life on land at all." Apart from his accent, many of his names for the different periods and eras sounded remarkably like ours, though he divided the Carboniferous into two periods which sounded more like lung diseases. "I knew something was strange when I saw the five of you, but I didn't think I was *this* far off. What year did you come from?"

"I was born in 648 of the New Calendar; it was 680 when I left, and I've been here three years."

"I've been asking your kube when the New Calendar began, but the answers don't mean anything to me, and it doesn't know who King Jesus was. I can't think of any incident in

Down to The Tethys Sea

history that wasn't in some way man-made that I could use as a landmark. I wish my wife were here; she was the historian, not me."

"What did you do?"

"I taught," the kube thought for a few seconds about the next word, and finally translated it as "house management," an even stranger choice of career for a man than life sciences or astronomy. Maybe he meant architecture. "Why were you going to the Ordovician?"

"Involuntarily. I was a political prisoner; the Ordovician was our," the kube didn't even attempt the next word, which sounded like 'gulag'. "So was Cassie - my wife." He was silent for a moment, as I steered around a 30-metre lycophyte. "They sent her, and all the other women, to another station a few million years uptime; that's where I thought I was when I saw you. They were nominally research stations, like yours, and the first prisoners they sent were geologists, biologists, astronomers; anyone who said the universe was more than six thousand years old was likely to find themselves half a billion years in the past. I used to think it was funny, in a scary sort of way, some bureaucrat's idea of a joke or a misguided attempt at kindness. Then they started sending anyone who disagreed with the President's idea of archaeology or history or..."

"House management?"

"Yeah. Actually, it was Cass who was the real activist; I think they exiled me because they didn't believe she could be doing everything she was without my help. Not that I didn't agree with what she was saying, of course, but I didn't want to be a martyr the way she did... Would you believe the Phi Beta Iota exorcised her, then raped her, in an attempt to make her recant?" He hid his face in his hands, and was silent until I turned the hoverover around and headed back to the station.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking up. "Thanks for the guided tour."

"No problem. When you're feeling better, I can take you out diving on the reef."

"Thanks; I'd like that. There aren't any land animals yet, are there, apart from us?"

"Only tiny ones that live off the plants, except during low tide - then you'll see eurypterids and amphibians and lungfish, but they never go far from water. The big land arthropods are up in the Carboniferous - giant dragonflies, arthrolepids longer than you are tall, roaches as big as your foot, spiders half a metre wide -" He shuddered, turned slightly pale, and muttered a monosyllable that the kube didn't translate.

"In 2014," he said, "they don't even know that the machines work both ways; we were exiled permanently. They sent us as far back as they could be sure the air was breathable, far enough back that they didn't have to worry too much about us changing the future. The math says that's impossible anyway, not that I know much math - just statistics - but they didn't want to take a chance."

"As far as I know, it is impossible," I said, "and I know some math. Even if it weren't, the great extinctions would probably cancel out anything a small party could do, except maybe breeding a new human race. The closest thing to a loophole in the math is a possibility that you might create an alternative timeline with an independent existence... but the math also says it should be impossible to cross from one existence to the next." I sighed. "On the other hand, the math doesn't really explain the blackout and window periods - do you know about those?"

"Not really. I know some times are harder to reach than others, and the past six thousand years are apparently out, but I don't know why - it's hard to make maps when everything's a one-way trip. For all I knew for sure, the machine was just a fancy method of execution."

"There are windows every sixty-six to seventy million years apart, and everything else is inaccessible - at least, with the machines we have at present. We don't know why, but the closest station to hometime is about a million years before the end of the Cretaceous. There's another near the beginning, one window in the Jurassic, one in the Triassic, one in the Permian, one in the Carboniferous, two in the Ordovician, one in the Cambrian, and one about ten million years before it. They exist before that, but you might as well go to Titan or Venus for all you can see there. One day they'll work out what we're doing wrong, and either fix it or stop trying."

The station was in sight now. "I wish I knew how far in the future you were from," Kaminsky said, sadly.

"The future?"

"Sure. Your technology is far ahead of ours - not just the time machine, but this vehicle, your kubes, everything I've seen."

That rocked me. I'd been assuming that *he* had to be from our future, because there was no trace of his culture in our history, nor any holes that it might have disappeared into; it hadn't occurred to me that the reverse might be true. "That's your room I'm staying in, isn't it?" he asked, as I carefully parked the hoverover.

"What? Yes."

"I'm sorry about that. What's that award in your room, your doctorate?"

"No..." I tried to explain it as best I could, and he nodded.

"My grandfather used to take me fishing," he said, almost wistfully. That rocked me, too; I've never known a man with the patience for fishing. "Spearfishing, you mean?"

"No, just sitting in a boat with rod and reel. One of the many traditional ways men in my time had of getting away from women, and less violent than most. What's the fishing like here?"

I heard myself say, "I could show you," and he replied, "That'd be great. Let me know when you're going."

We soon settled into a routine of fishing every second or third day, bringing back more than the six of us could eat. He

Absolute Magnitude

worked on his Europic, and telling the kube what history he knew. Green decided that the King Jesus he referred to might have been an obscure Judean teacher known in his own tongue as Yeshua ben Joseph, who'd died in France in the fifth century of the New Calendar... but that suggested that Kaminsky's hometown was nearly two millennia later than our own, which none of us would believe. "It's more probably a coincidence of names," I said, when the five of us met in the kitchen one night, after Kaminsky had gone to bed. "It's not that uncommon a name..."

"I don't think he's from our line at all," said Fox. "Almost nothing in the two thousand years of history he's told us about actually happened - and I'm glad of it. Wars, plagues, genocide, slavery, witch-hunts and inquisitions, torture, mutilating children..."

"Either that," suggested Thom, "or he has a horrible imagination. The things he's said about the way women are treated..."

"You think he's lying? The kube says he believes what he says."

"Then he's insane. It's easier to believe that than to believe in alternate timelines - or that our society could have completely vanished. When does he say his people reached the moon?"

"1969 AD," I said. "About 2350 to 2380 NC."

"And they didn't see any of our Bases there? What about Mars?"

"Unmanned probes only. I know, it's bizarre, it sounds as though they spent two millennia learning and accomplishing nothing and going nowhere - their Europeans didn't even reach America or Australia until about 2000 - but I believe him, even if it means believing in alternate worlds, or cyclic time, or something like that."

"They don't seem to be ahead of us in any other science, either," grumbled Miller, "and they're certainly not any happier than we are. April, you're been spending more time with him than the rest of us, what do you think?"

"I like him," I replied. "I think he's saner than someone who came out of a madhouse like the one he describes should be - which doesn't mean I think he's lying, though he may be concentrating on the horrors. But apart from that, I think he's a pretty good human being."

They digested that. "So what do you suggest we do?" asked Green.

"Scientific method. Let's hypothesize that he's from an alternate world; use our history as the control, and his as the experiment, see where they agree and where they diverge."

"And wait for Alpha to send us a real historian, or take him off our hands," said Fox, "unless anyone has a better idea?"

Two days later, I loaded the gill helms and harpoon pistols and other underwater gear into the hoverover and took Kaminsky out to see the reef, as I'd promised. I instructed

him in the use of the pistol, and was surprised to hear that he knew how to fire one; hometime males aren't permitted to use any gun shorter than their arm. I decided not to tell him the traditional penalty for breaking that law.

The water was beautifully clear, and the colours brilliant (unlike the surface, where what life there was was uniformly drab). A *Cladoselache*, a two-metre shark, watched us cautiously, then disappeared into deeper waters. Dozens of trilobites and brachiopods crawled over the coral, occasionally providing a meal for bottom-dwelling placoderms and rays. Kaminsky was singing something about an octopus, and I suppose I was showing off, pointing out the different species, so what happened next is entirely my fault.

I was chasing a phacopid trilobite, larger than any in Thom's collection, when we were suddenly surrounded by a swarm of ammonites and small fish. I glanced around, and saw a huge placoderm swimming slowly in our direction - about eight metres long, with the mottled brown body and white-tipped fins of a *Titanichthys*, a huge but harmless filter-feeding placoderm. I pointed it out to Kaminsky, and continued my pursuit of the elusive phacopid. The rest of the world was a flurry of brightly coloured movement, and by the time I had grabbed the trilobite and looked again, the *Titanichthys* had closed on me much faster than it had a right to, and I could see dagger-like picks and sharp-edged bony plates inside its mouth. I realised with horror that I'd misidentified the monster, and was only a few metres from a predator that could eat any contemporary shark as an appetiser. I fumbled for my pistol, knowing that the harpoon would never pierce the placoderm's armour-plated skull, and waited for the picks to grab me. An instant later, something shiny shot through the water, hitting the fish in the left eye and carrying on into its brain. I heard the snap as Kaminsky pressed the power switch, sending an electric current down the tether; the monster twitched once, shattering a clump of staghorn coral with its tail, and then sank to the seabed. So did I.

"What was that?"

"*Dunkleosteus*," I said, weakly. I swam back to the hoverover, and he disconnected his tether and followed. "Top predator around here... but it had the same markings as a *Titanichthys*, and I'd never seen that before. I'll have to tell Miller." I hauled myself back onto the deck, and pried off the gill helm. Kaminsky did the same, and collapsed beside me, his face only a few centimetres from mine. Impulsively, I kissed him, and he kissed back. Soon, we were helping each other out of our suits, tasting and touching each other, all of each other...

A hoverover on the Tethys sea is possibly the ideal place for making love. At least, that's how it felt at the time.

I told Miller about the *Dunkleosteus*, but not about the sex, and after grilling me thoroughly, she muttered something about adaptive mimicry and convergent evolution. Daniel and I decided not to try sharing a bed, but love-making sessions in the hoverover became a regular feature of our fishing trips. No-one seemed to mind as long as we brought back enough fish. I

Down to The Tethys Sea

went back to spending my evenings at the telescope, while Daniel and the kube swapped notes on history.

If he was from an alternate world, it had deviated from ours some time in the century before the New Calendar was introduced, and he began studying history avidly. For a few days, he was visibly excited, asking me what I knew of the emancipation of the slaves, the Women's Academy in Athens, the defeat of the Thebans, even the invention of the telescope and the mapping of the moon. Then, he visibly withdrew from all of us, so suddenly that it worried me.

That night, when I finished at the telescope, I saw lights in the room that housed the machine. Thinking that another unexpected delivery might be arriving, I hurried over. Instead, I found Daniel studying the controls, a wild look in his eyes, a pack on his back, and a laser torch in his left hand.

"What are you doing?" I said it softly, not wanting to wake anyone else, but it startled him nonetheless.

"You have to help me," he said, quickly but just as quietly. "I've found her."

"Found who?"

"My wife, Cassie. I know where she went."

I suspect I stared. "Where she -?"

"Ancient Athens," he said. "That's where your world diverged from mine. The philosopher Cassandra, who founded the Academy... who taught you about scientific method, who told Aristotle where he was wrong, who gave you the telescope, and gunpowder to defeat the Thebans... she was Cassie, my wife. That's why your world is so much ahead of mine."

I remembered what I knew of Cassandra, and realised that it made sense. She'd taught that slavery was evil and unnecessary, and that women could do anything at least as well as men; her Academy, founded at the same time as Plato's, had admitted women and slaves, but not slave-owners, and freemen could only attend if accompanied by their wives or adult daughters. The Academy had pioneered scientific method and invented the more accurate New Calendar, and legend had it that Cassandra had also given us cannon, mapped the moon, taught us about evolution, named the geological ages, urged changes to Greek law, and predicted the discovery of new continents and planets. Freed of the fear of a slave revolt and armed against the barbarians, the revitalised Greek culture spread across Europe and eventually the great globe itself. All this might have been possible for a time traveller, almost impossible for anyone else...

"You may be right," I said, cautiously. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm going to join her!"

"Join her? But the machine won't take you there..."

"It took her," he said, grimly. "Maybe a new window opened after she was put into the machine; has anyone else thought to try? But anyway, I'm going to risk it; if I'm wrong, the worst that can happen is that I come out at the nearest window, which is your hometime, and I can cope with that."

"And what will you do if you find her?"

He stared at me, a confused smile on his face. "Don't you understand? She's my *Wife*!"

Your wife, I thought numbly. I thought of everything Daniel had told us about his world - wars, plagues, genocide, slavery, the way they treated women - and how we'd avoided it, because of Cassandra. Cassie. Okay, maybe Daniel could help make it an even better world - but I wasn't eager to take a chance. "Why the laser? And what's in the pack?"

"Survival gear, in case I miss the window and land somewhere else. And the little kube; if Cassie could make that much difference with nothing but her memory, imagine what we could do together with this much technology." He set some switches on the controls, then hurried over to me, grabbed me, and gave me a quick kiss. "Thank you," he murmured. "I couldn't have done this without your help; thank you for everything you've taught me." He let go and rushed onto the platform before I could speak. Lights flickered on the projector, and I realised he'd set the timer. I took a deep breath, ran towards him, and tackled him, sending both of us flying off the platform and into the far wall.

"Idiot woman!" he yelled. "What the hell are you doing?" He broke free of me - he was stronger, and much heavier, and obviously a more experienced fighter - and when I tried to grab him again, he swung the torch and hit me across the face. He leapt back towards the platform, and I grabbed his foot, bringing him down. He rolled over and glared at me, lying half on and half off the platform, and then a column of violet light descended from the projector, chopping him in two just above the waist.

It was a beautiful day, and I reached into the box for some fresh bait.

We were never able to learn what had happened to the rest of Kaminsky; it didn't arrive at Alpha or any of the other stations, and if it had appeared anywhere else, the chances that anyone would ever find it were negligible.

The five of us told Alpha that we'd found Kaminsky dead on the platform, and that we thought he'd probably been trying to get back to his own hometime and made a mistake with the timer. They promised to send some technicians to take the machine apart and rebuild it, but regretted that, until then, we were stuck in the Devonian for at least a week while they ran more tests uphen. But that's okay, as long as the world we remember is still there.

After that, the only problem was what to do with Kaminsky's body. We couldn't keep it until the machine was working; we couldn't bury it, for fear the bones might end up in the fossil record; and I didn't want to feed it into the conveyor with the other waste. In the end, we decided to bury him at sea, with the others telling me it's what he would have wanted. Miller used the laser torch to break the bones into fragments, and I took the pieces out onto the hoverover.

There was a tug on the line, and I reeled in a *Stethecanthus* nearly as long as my leg. The Tethys sea is still the ideal place for fishing. Especially when you have red meat for bait.

This Sporting Life

by Chris Bunch

Copyright © Chris Bunch 2006

The fat man crept out of the hotel's service entrance, peered around cautiously.

The night was silent, except for a few passing lifters and the buzz of wet circuitry above, on the primitive electric grid.

All he had to do, he thought, was go down three blocks to the lux hotel where the lifter cab rank should still be manned, grab the first one, and make for the spaceport.

Then he'd be safe.

He swore at himself for thinking he could outthink Them by staying in this working-class hotel, instead of the properly luxurious one his per diem entitled him to.

Hotels like this one was where They stayed, saving their credits for alk and bail funds.

The fat man, wishing he'd had some kind of military training to help, crept along the high wall, moving as quietly as he knew how.

It was late, very late, and hopefully They had drunk themselves into oblivion and wouldn't still be looking for him.

He'd fooled them for awhile with twin connecting rooms, one under his own name, the other under a false one. They'd broken into the first room, smashed it to bits, hammered on the connecting door, but, since there was no answer, had given up.

For the moment.

The fat man came to the first street crossing, crouched and went across, waddling faster than he'd moved in years, except when he was on the field.

The silence held.

He went down another block, and reached a boulevard, started across.

He was halfway to the other side when the baying came. A block away, half a dozen stumbling men saw and recognized him.

"Kill th' fool," "Tear 'im," "Deader'n th' Devils," the cries came.

The man ran faster. Safety was close, very close.

He didn't make it.

Two dozen of Them came out of an alley ahead of him.

The fat man skidded to a stop, darted across the street, hoping for safety, an open door, stairs, anything.

There was nothing but high stone walls.

They caught him within a hundred meters.

Bottles arced toward him, struck. He stumbled on, and then a heavy rock took him between the shoulder blades. He fell, clawed his way up. But it was too late. They were on him with boots, iron bars, fists.

It was almost a relief to let the pain take him down and down into nothingness.

Jasmine King was an utterly beautiful woman, so beautiful and competent that her former employers, the security firm of Cerberus Systems, had decided she was a robot, and hence no longer deserving of a salary.

That had led her into the employ of Star Risk, Ltd., where she was now office manager, head and only member of Star Risk's Research Department, head and only member of the Personnel Department, and a junior field operative, since her experience in the covert was less exhaustive than the four other principals.

Star Risk's offices on the 43rd floor of a new 50 story high-rise, were mixed with touches of the old-fashioned, the current fashion on the pleasure world of Trimalchio IV.

There were two people in the large reception area: Jasmine, currently manning the reception desk, and a rather mousy man.

Jasmine keyed her whisper mike.

"A possible client," she said. "Not rich-looking. Named Weitman. Said he'd discuss his business with an operative. Suspect he's a little confused, has a cheating wife or partner, and thinks Star Risk is some sort of investigative service."

Jasmine listened.

"No," she said. "There's nobody else out here but me, and no jobs on tap, either."

She smiled as Weitman looked up.

"Someone will be right with you."

The little man nodded jerkily.

The door to the inner offices opened, and a nightmare lumbered in, all silky fur, and almost three meters tall.

"Good morning, Mister Weitman," the creature rumbled. "I am Amanandrala Grokkonomonslf, which no one beyond my race can pronounce, so you should call me Grok."

"Come into my office, and we can discuss your problem."

The little man got up, and followed Grok.

He stopped, turned back to Jasmine.

"For your information, Miss... King, I'm not confused about what Star Risk does, nor am I looking for separation evidence."

He smiled, a not altogether pleasant smile.

"My father taught me to read lips at a very young age."

Weitman followed Grok, closing the door behind him.

Jasmine King was busy proving she blushed perfectly, as she did most other things.

"Have you ever heard of the game of skyball?" Weitman asked Grok earnestly.

The alien suspected Weitman did everything earnestly.

"A game?" Grok said. "No, I haven't, beyond a little, historically, of Earth football. My race doesn't practice

This Sporting Life

physical displays of competition, but rather find pleasure in debate on a higher level.

"When we aren't killing each other," he added.

Weitman wasn't listening beyond the "no."

"Skyball is one of the greatest of all sports," he said. "It requires the utmost of physical development and coordination, plus a high degree of intellectual achievement. There is also a large element of chance, which makes all things more interesting."

"I assume," Grok said, "given the name, that it's played with aircraft, such as the ancient game of poloponies I've read about."

"There are no mechanical devices in skyball," Weitman said. "Except, of course, for the ball, the antigravity generators, and the random computer."

"Ah," Grok said. "Sheer muscle and skill." Weitman didn't notice the sarcasm, as he went on:

"Skyball's an invention of the early spacefarers," he said. "It was originally played in space, under zero-g conditions. But as it grew in popularity, and few fans find zero gravity exactly easy on their digestive tracts, particularly if they're drinking, its rules were changed, and it is now played in stadiums, on planets."

"The field has antigravity generators above it, so normal gravity is negated. There are ten women or men to a side, and their task is to carry the ball, any way they choose, to the opponent's goal."

"The other team, naturally, tries to stop them and secure the ball itself, in any way they choose that doesn't constitute a major felony. Play is in four quarters of fifteen minutes each."

"To complicate matters, the ball has an internal, varying gyroscope, so, in mid-throw, it might suddenly change its direction of travel."

"In addition, there are antigravity generators hidden below the playing field, which turn on and off in a random manner to affect the ball and the players."

"Skyball has become enormously popular within the Alliance, particularly on certain worlds, who have vaunted rivalries."

"This is quite fascinating," Grok said. "But Star Risk deals deal in bullets, as the old saying goes."

"I assume you have professional athletes playing the sport, and would hardly like to recruit mercenaries and men of violence such as ourselves."

"The sport is one thing," Weitman said. "It is violent enough. But there is violence off the field as well. Certain planets have become absolute fanatics about skyball, so extremely so that actual wars have been fought over interplanetary championships."

Grok made no comment.

"This is bad enough," Weitman said. "But there are also tuggish followers who have attacked players and coaches."

"More recently, some of them have assaulted members of my guild, which is the Professional Referees Association. A week ago one of our members was beaten to death after a match."

"This is intolerable."

"The current league finals are between the planets of Chelsea and Warick, whose fans are among the worst of the offenders."

"We advised them that if they cannot guarantee security to our members, we will refuse to judge these finals."

"Both worlds seemed unconcerned, and said they would provide officials of their own."

Weitman shivered.

"For reasons I won't go into, that is a terrible idea."

"PRA has authorized me to investigate various firms who provide security services, and Star Risk is the one I have chosen."

"We want to hire you to keep the seven referees who'll officiate at these final matches on Warick from any harm, and are prepared to pay one million credits, plus all expenses, to ensure no harm comes to them."

Grok stroked the fur on his chest, considering.

"Interesting," he said. "Very interesting. I think Star Risk will be more than delighted to accept your offer."

"You did what?" M'chel Riss moaned.

Riss was tall, blonde, green-eyed, and looked more like a model than the Alliance Marine major she'd been before she quit the service and went mercenary as one of the founders of Star Risk, Ltd.

"It seems like a nice, simple assignment," Grok said in an injured tone.

"A nice, simple way to get dead, you mean," Chas Goodnight said.

Goodnight, a few centimeters taller than Riss, was sandy-haired, with a friendly twinkle in his eye. M'chel considered him the most amoral person she'd ever met. He was also ex-Alliance, a "bested," one of the handful of bio-modified commandos who did the loose confederation's dirty work. He'd been one of the most respected besters, until he decided cat burglary paid better than assassination and skulking through the bushes. Star Risk had broken him out of a death cell. Now he wasn't quite a full partner, but more than an employee.

Goodnight's talents included being able to see in the dark, reactions three times that of an athlete, brain circuitry for battle analysis, ears able to pick up frequencies up to the FM range. In bester mode, he was "powered" by a tiny battery at the base of his spine. When it ran dry, after about 15 minutes or so, he was drained, until he input a few thousand calories and hopefully slept around the clock.

Friedrich von Baldur, the firm's head, nodded slowly, but didn't say anything. Von Baldur was another rogue, who

Absolute Magnitude

claimed to have been a colonel in the Alliance, but was actually a warrant officer who hastily left the service ahead of various court-martial charges involving government supplies gone missing, nor was his real name von Baldr.

"You three *obviously* know something more than I do," Grok said.

"Skyball's a game," Riss started, "and—"

"I know that," Grok interrupted. "Weitman gave me a basic briefing, and I looked it up in *Encyclopedia Galactica*. Seems a rough enough, rather predictable sport. Not that we'll have anything to do with the game, merely protecting the officials."

"Merely," Goodnight snorted. "*Merely!*?" Grok, comfort of my youth, bower of my old age, let me tell you a story.

"A few years back, when I was still somewhat honest, and working for the Alliance shilling, me and a few of my teammates were chasing a guy named Purvis around the Galactic lens.

"The Alliance wanted him alive, because he'd...never mind what he'd done. They wanted him bad, so they could work him over and find out what they wanted to find out. We were told we'd get our paws slapped if we came back without him, or maybe worse, with him in a bodybag.

"Purvis heard he was hot, and so he cut and run. We got word that he'd set up shop as a games advisor on Cheslea, which is one of the teams in this skyball championship. Their team, by the way, is the Black Devils.

"Games advisor, right. So we hare off after his young ass.

"We get to Cheslea, and there's no sign of him. The planet's a madhouse, which it is anyway, since the people seem to think logic starts in the key of C sharp, and run their society accordingly.

"But when we arrive Cheslea's an extra-special madhouse, because the Black Devils are facing their worst enemy, the Uniteds, which are from the planet of Warick.

"I see you nodding, Grok. It gets worse.

"So we moil here and there, and there's no sign of Purvis, and then it's time for the games to start.

"It's one all, then two all, and game Five is gonna settle matters.

"We get reliable word that our boy is gonna be at the game, and so we show up, with prize seats, two ways out, and a big sack to put Purvis in when we find him.

"The stadium, by the way, is, or was, anyway, sort of open air, with the antigravs hung on spidery scaffolding arcing over the top.

"It was a crappy hot day, and the sun was blistering down. I wanted a beer in the worst way, but I knew if I got one, and the mucketies found out I was sluicing on the job, I'd get a strip torn off. Which would've been a lot better than what happened to all of us when we got back to friendly waters.

"But I'm getting ahead of things.

"None of us were paying attention to the game, we're busy looking around for our lad.

"And we spot him, in the last ten minutes of the game. It was kind of hard to see, because all the stands were glittering. The Cheslea fans had programs that were silver foil, and the dazzle was, well, dazzling.

"There's a lot of hollering going on, because it's a tight game, and everybody from Cheslea just *knows* the referees have been bought out by Warick.

"We're working our way up to the top of the stadium, and the score is tied. Then Cheslea makes a goal, and the officials call it illegal or some such.

"I thought the fans were going to go apeshit, especially when Warick scores a few seconds later, and the clock is running out.

"Instead, this low muttering starts, and gets louder, and I feel a creeping down my spine. Everybody else on the team is looking just as nervous.

"The officials are gathered together, down on the field.

"Then there's this almighty flash, coming from everywhere, and a gout of smoke, and there's no more goddamned referees down there.

"Turns out this was Purvis's ultimate plan if things went awry. Print the programs on this silver, reflecting paper. Put a little aiming hole in it...which was disguised as a skyball with an emblem on the cover...and then, if things went wrong, as they just had, hold the program up, catch the sun, and aim it down at the officials.

"The whole stadium was a huge mirror.

"Fried the refs like steaks. Well done steaks. Barely a few coals here and there.

"And at that point things went completely berserk, with the fans from Warick trying to get out and back to their transports, and the Cheslea rooters trying to stop them.

"It was a hell of a riot.

"A *hell* of a riot," Goodnight repeated.

"What happened to your target, this Purvis?" Riss asked.

"We found out he got dead in the hooraw," Goodnight said, blandly. "Which of course none of us had anything to do with. But we still got in a world of shit when we got back to base.

"There's no justice in this world," he concluded, then looked at Grok.

"And that's the kind of thing you've dumped us into for a lousy mil and burial expenses."

"Sometimes I wish," Riss said forlornly, "Star Risk didn't have this tradition of never refusing an assignment unless we don't get paid or the client's lied to us more than acceptably. Who made that idiot policy, anyway?"

"I think," Friedrich said, "it was you, m'dear."

The madhouse started at Warick's main spaceport. Fans from Cheslea were cascading off chartered transports, in

This Sporting Life

every shape from unconscious stretcher cases to hungover and fighting to sober and looking for a drink.

The five Star Risk operatives came in on a standard liner, and were able to grab a lim to their hotel by virtue of looking sober and waving a large bill.

They overflew improvised parades, street fairs, and marching bands.

"So who'd 'ja favor?" the lim driver asked.

"Peace and quiet," van Balduz said.

The driver snorted.

"Damn' little of that to be got for the next two weeks.

P'raps I best run you back to the port and you can try another system."

"We're where we belong," Riss said.

The driver looked back, and almost sideswiped a cargo lifer dripping banners: WARICK RULES, UNITEDS CONQUER, and such.

"You folks have something to do with the Finals?"

He was about to be impressed.

"We're psychologists," Goodnight said. "Specializing in the madness of crowds."

The driver's head snapped forward, and he said no more.

As they grounded at the Shelburne, which was not only where the officials were staying but the most luxurious hotel on Warick, he not only refused to help unload their surprisingly heavy luggage, but also would take no more than the set fare.

"I note they take this skyball most seriously," Grok said. "I have never heard of a cabbie refusing a tip."

"That's a sign and a warning," Riss said. "Let's make sure we don't do anything else to show what we think."

"And, most particularly," von Balduz said, "Make sure we do not wear any emblems suggesting we back either the Black Devils nor the Uniteds. Nor should mistakenly wear their colors, which are, naturally, black and red for the Devils, and solid blue for the Uniteds."

"Actually," Weitman said, "we're quite prepared for all normal eventualities."

The other six male and female officials in the hotel suite in the room nodded agreement.

"First," the referee went on, "note my outer clothing, these black and white striped pants and shirts, are proof against most solid projectiles, although, of course, the shock must still be accounted for.

"This is why, under the shirt, and extending down over my groin, is a shock-absorbing vest, which is also intended to deal with hurled bottles, rocks, and such.

"My little cap is padded, and will take an impact of a kilo at up to 20kph.

"My boots are steel-toed and -soled, and I'm wearing knee and elbow pads in case I get knocked down.

"I'll have gas plugs in my nostrils, and baffled plugs in my ears, in case they try to use any amplified sound devices against us.

"Plus, I'm carrying a small gas projector on my belt, and...you must not breathe a word of this to anyone else...I'm carrying a small aperture blaster here, in my crotch.

"And of course there's stadium security, supposedly one for every 25 people in the audience, although we've got to assume some of these guards will be as likely to be partisan as the crowds.

"Which is why we're depending on you five to get us out of any real problems."

He smiled at the Star Risk operatives.

"Wonderful," Goodnight said. "Simply frigging wonderful. Ah, for the life of a sports fan."

Both the Devils and the Uniteds were at their conditioning peak in the first game.

The action swayed back and forth for three quarters, neither side able to score.

Then, halfway through the fourth quarter, with Chelsea having the ball, the Warick team leapt high into the air, trying a drive over the Warick line, going up almost to the roof of the covered stadium, floating for an instant in mock weightlessness, then lobbing the ball hard for the small goal.

The pitch was clear of the antigrav generators, and was going straight as hurled when its gyro came to life, and sent the ball spinning into the hands of a Warick end.

He moved instantly, threw hard, under the Chelsea players, still coming down from their positions near the roof. One-nothing.

And that was the only score for the game.

There'd also been no penalties called, even though M'chel Riss, from her position in a skybox, saw at least two kneecings and one punch to a woman's breasts.

The fans were well behaved, and mostly fairly sober.

Grok saw only twenty or so people grabbed by stadium security for offenses like hurling smuggled bottles at the players, or having a private punch-up in their row.

"If it stays like this," Weitman said, "we'll all be home free."

Star Risk decided for the second game they'd spread out through the stadium, keeping only the most noticeable Grok in the skybox, with a com to their earpieces.

This game was far more open than the first. It seemed both sides had been gauging their opponents, and now, having found weaknesses, drove for the kill.

And this time the officials seemed to have done the same.

Eight penalties were called in the first quarter, six in the second.

And the score was 7-3, again with Warick in the lead.

Absolute Magnitude

A woman official had just called the first penalty of the third — tripping, which seemed to be one of the few things, beyond bludgeons, skyball didn't permit.

Von Baldur, near one of the player's dugouts, intended to keep them from aerial assault from their fans, caught the movement.

He spun, saw an enormously fat woman dig something out of her oversize handbag, and scale it at the referee.

Von Baldur shouted "Down," and the official went flat.

The something turned out to be a hand-made ancient boomerang, and smashed into the turf not a meter from the woman's body.

The obese woman was digging in her handbag once more. Friedrich didn't wait around to see what it was, but swarmed over the high fence separating the fans from the field.

There was a stadium security man who shouted: "You! Hey you! You can't do that!"

Von Baldur paid him no mind, but went up the steps, two at a time, then shouldered his way into the row the fat woman was in, just as she pulled out what looked to be a grenade.

A younger man, but with the same piggy features of the fat woman, came up, fists lifting.

Von Baldur snap-kicked him in the chest, let him stumble into his evident relative, rolled away as the grenade, hissing, dropped to the concrete.

A few seconds later, it went off, and a noxious gas sprayed the area.

By that time von Baldur was rolling back down the steps, not turning around to see people gagging, on their knees choking, vomiting, until he was halfway back the way he'd come.

He noted with satisfaction the fat woman and her relative were among the worst hit, then looked down at what had been his rather dapper lounging outfit.

"New suit," he muttered. "Three hundred and twenty seven credits. Expense."

The end score was 9-4. Two out of two for Warick.

The game had been stopped three times, when players were taken off on stretchers. One of them didn't appear to be breathing.

The visiting fans from Cheslea were going somewhat berserk, sure that the game was rigged for Warick, that somehow the antigravs or the ball itself had been rigged to favor the home team.

Goodnight was in the Shelburne's bar, the archaically named Heron and Beaver, and he saw one of the Cheslea players, surrounded by two prosperous businessmen sporting Blue, and half a dozen bodyguards, women and men whose eyes never stopped sweeping the crowded bar, and whose hands stayed close to their waistbands.

The player looked like the others — stocky, well muscled, but the muscles were those of an acrobat.

Goodnight wandered over, and when the player made a joke about a rival team, Goodnight laughed, lifted his glass in a mock toast, grinned wryly.

"You know about the Knights, eh?"

Goodnight had never heard of them.

"Of course," he said. "And your story isn't the half of it."

He told a story of his own. The original butt of the joke had been an incompetent and unlucky Alliance unit, but now it became the Knights.

One of the businessmen bought him another beer, and Goodnight was suddenly the player's new best friend, although the bodyguards regarded him most suspiciously.

Chas wasn't sure what he was looking for, other than more familiarity with the assignment.

The businessmen got drunk, but everyone else stayed sober, although Goodnight let it appear that he was becoming wobblier than he was.

The evening wasn't producing much, except the probability of a thick head if Goodnight kept drinking.

Fortunately, tomorrow was a rest day.

"So tell me, Dov," Chas said, deep in the evening, "I could see today how good you are. But what made you get into skyball in the first place? What else did you consider?"

"Aw," the man said, "I always liked playing. I come from money, so m'da had a yacht, and we could always make up a game somewhere in the asteroids or in one of the system's boneyards.

"Why'd I turn pro?" Dov looked around, making sure no one else was listening. "I got in some trouble, and the magistrate said it was either conditioning, prison, or going off-world. Da had disowned me, so I was thinking about the military.

"But that sounded real dangerous, and so when a semi-pro team said they needed substitutes, I made damned sure I was there at the head of the line and worked my ass off to play harder and better than anyone else.

"I mean, the Alliance military? You can get actually *killed* doing that."

Goodnight had nothing to say.

"If you're awake and coherent," Grok said in what he probably thought was a coo, "or at least awake, since you're on your feet, Chas, my friend, I have something of interest for you and for the others."

The Star Risk operatives were assembled for a scanty breakfast in one of the suites' dining rooms.

Riss and Jasmine had little but juice and a bran cereal since they were watching their weight. Grok had had four raw eggs and a tea, and Freddie von Baldur, also aware of his waistline, had just caff.

Goodnight, who normally shoveled down breakfast platters with both hands, was gingerly putting a fruit juice and vitamins down.

This Sporting Life

"I have acquired," Grok went on, "probably from too long an association with you humans, which can be measured in nano-seconds, a certain distrust for humanity."

"A good thing to have," von Baldur said.

"Over the past four days, I've taken the liberty to plant some devices, listening devices, in our clients' rooms," Grok said.

"Imagine my surprise when I've discovered that four of the seven have been in negotiations with various elements to shade their judgments."

"Well, bless my soul," Jasmine said. "And we're supposed to be keeping them alive?"

"Let's bail," Chas said, hangover making him snarly.

"Perhaps we should, perhaps we should not," Grok said.

"It is interesting that two of them appear to have taken bribes to favor Chelsea, and two to back Warick in their calls."

"Ah," M'chel said. "That makes it two against two against three. Assuming those three haven't already made their own arrangements."

"Most interesting," von Baldur said. "And now I understand why you wanted to talk about this, Grok."

"Exactly," the alien said. "The equation seemed to balance to me."

"We could just keep on," King said, nodding understandingly, "and let matters shake out as they will."

"No," Goodnight said. "Not business as usual. What about the money? If they're getting cute, what's to say they won't get cuter when it's payday?"

"My thought as well," von Baldur said. "I think I shall approach our principals, and inform them that circumstances have altered, and we require the million credits to be placed in an escrow account."

"With, say, Alliance Credit."

Riss smiled, a bit sharkishly.

"I assume, Freddy," she said, "you aren't planning on telling our seven clients or the Professional Referees Association that happens to be our bank."

"I was not," von Baldur said. "As I have said before, and no doubt shall say again, never smarten up a chump. If they ask about Alliance Credit, of course I shall tell them. But not before."

"I am not content," Grok said, "that we are responding properly to events."

"Nor am I," King said. They were alone in a suite. "A mob can get out of hand very quickly."

"Perhaps you should check with some of our colleagues for emergency assistance," Grok said.

"Just what I was thinking," Jasmine said.

"You realize," Riss said, "since the series is the best of three, and Warick's already won two, if today's game makes

it what I think they call a shutout, there will be serious chaos."

"I'm aware, I'm aware," Goodnight said. "That's why I've got a blaster in my boot and another under this stupid jacket. Not to mention a couple of grenades, real bangsticks, not gas type like Fatty had, in the pockets."

"There's also some rifles in the skybox," Riss said. "I put them there myself, in the first aid locker."

It did get rough.

Goodnight saw "his" player from the bar kick the legs out from under a Black Devil, then "accidentally" fall on his chest, heard ribs crack.

A referee was looking right at Dov, then turned away, without hitting the penalty flasher across his uniform's back.

Warick led at the end of the half.

As the players trooped off, there was a roar from the crowd. Riss saw ten fans, arms linked to form a phalanx, charge the stadium security at one of the field gates. Behind them came twenty or so goons, mostly drunk, waving clubs they'd somehow smuggled in through security.

"I don't think so," Riss said to herself, and ran hard to intersect the miniature mob.

Jasmine King was already there, blocking the gate.

One man swung at her, and she kicked him in the kneecap, pushed him into his mate, then smashed a third in the temple.

"Goddamit," Riss shouted, "Not with your hands!"

Jasmine heard her, looked away, and somebody punched her in the jaw.

King staggered, went down, and the man was about to put the boot in.

"Enough of this shit," Riss snarled, drew a blaster and blew the man's head off.

Blood sprayed across the mob, and they shrieked, hesitated.

M'chel shot two more of them in painful places, listened to the yowls in satisfaction, then ran forward and dragged Jasmine away.

Chelsea came from behind to take their first game, 8-6.

"How is it?" von Baldur asked.

Jasmine gingerly moved her jaw. The other operatives were standing around her in the hotel suite.

"No breaks," she said.

"What about teeth?" Riss said.

"I think a couple are loose," King said. "But they'll tighten up."

"You're sure you don't want a doctor?" Riss asked.

"No," Jasmine said. "I'll be fine."

Riss thought, of course. A woman who might or might not be a robot and was keeping her secrets would hardly chance discovery by a stranger.

Absolute Magnitude

"I don't like this," Goodnight said. "Not one goddamned stinking bit. Nobody roughs up our Jasmine."

"Why Chas," King said. "You're getting sentimental."

Goodnight grunted, poured a drink.

"If they were to blame, I'd say dump our clients and let the bodies bounce where they will," he said.

"No," von Baldur said. "That would hardly be professional."

"A thought," M'chel Riss said. "This is a one-time contract, right? We're never ever coming back to this world, nor to Cheslea, and we're sure as hell never going to get involved with sports, right?"

"No," Grok said. "I have learned my lesson well."

"Fine," Riss said, and her voice was very hard. "These bastards want to escalate...we should be able to handle that, as well."

"Jasmine and I are far ahead of you," Grok said. "All we need is permission to implement."

He explained.

When he finished, Goodnight and King had taut smiles on their faces. Von Baldur and Riss were stony-faced.

"Do we need to put it to a vote?" Riss said.

"I do not see why," von Baldur said. "The plan appears to give us the best of both worlds."

"And we do have a long weekend before the next match,"

Goodnight said. "More than time enough for Jasmine to get things moving."

"Good," Jasmine said, getting up from the couch she'd been laying on. "Assuming my jaw doesn't fall off, I'll start making the calls."

The fourth game had high stakes. If Cheslea won it, it would be a tie series, if Warick, that was the end.

The fans seeped into the stadium slowly, quietly. The stadium security made no attempt to react when gate metal detectors buzzed, nor did they ever see bulging coats.

Weitman met von Baldur inside the entrance tunnel.

"I'm afraid there might be a riot today," he said.

"Do not worry," von Baldur said. "There is only one mob, and there are five of us. We have them outnumbered."

Weitman attempted a smile.

"We should have practiced a...what do you military sorts call it, an emergency withdrawal."

"There is no need to practice anything," von Baldur said.

"We're most competent at what we do."

A few minutes later, the game began.

Play was vicious, but the officials called penalties fairly, or at least evenly.

Three players on each side were thrown out for roughness and arguing with the referees.

At the first quarter's end, it was 2-2.

At the second, it was 5-3, Warick leading.

The stands were restive, and every now and again a bottle, generally of unbreakable plas, rained down from somewhere.

Von Baldur was with Goodnight in the skybox, on a com.

"Child Rowland, Child Rowland, this is Star Risk."

"Star Risk, this is Child Rowland," a distinctly cultured voice came.

"Child Rowland, what's your location?"

"Orbiting at, oh, three zed meters right over that great box of yours."

"Are you ready?"

"That's affirm. On your signal."

"Captain Hook, this is Star Risk."

"Hook here."

"Ready?"

"Ready, braced, strapped in, and will deploy on your signal."

"All stations, this is Star Risk. Stand by. Clear."

Third quarter, 8-5, still Warick's favor.

"Is everybody ready to move?" von Baldur asked into the Star Risk net.

The other three, around the stadium, responded.

"Very well," von Baldur said. "Now, assuming that Warick holds its lead, they will assemble the team in the center of the stadium. The officials will present the winners with a trophy."

"At that time, we shall move."

"Clear."

"Understood."

"Will comply," came the responses.

Fourth quarter, two minutes left to play, Warick held the lead 10-6.

"I think we can make certain assumptions," von Baldur said. "It would appear that Warick has won the series."

"Looks like, Freddie," Goodnight agreed, staring out the skybox's window. "All we have to—holy flipping shit on a centrifuge!"

He was moving, out the door of the skybox, and von Baldur puzzled out after him for an instant.

Then he saw, from another skybox about a quarter around the top of the arena, three men bringing out lengths of steel, fitting them together into a framework with a rail in its center. Then they brought out a tube, let fins extrude, and put the rocket onto the rail.

A fourth man brought out a squat tripod, and crouched behind it, turning the sight on.

Goodnight dimly heard a great roar from the crowd as the last seconds ticked down, and he was running hard, pushing past people, but far, too far, from that skybox.

The officials were hurrying toward the field's center, where the Uniteds were nervously waiting.

Continued on page 51

Hard Time

by Denise Lopes Heald

Copyright © Denise Lopes Heald 2006

The flooding stream thundered a wall of sound that isolated Stanton from the riders before and behind his gray gelding. Wreathed in cloud vapor and rain, they rode a world as insubstantial seeming as time and as elusive as escape. Only the scent of sodden loam and waterlogged wood anchored Stanton to what he chose to call reality, lest he go irretrievably mad. In the mists, ghosts hovered: Tia, little Wren, Father...

The gray wove beneath a drooping tree bow that wet Stanton's hat. Brush loomed out of the rain and snagged the long skirts of his weather coat. Was it another day or not?

Yesterday had passed the same, filled with odd turnings where water-storm and time-storm confused each other and dimmed the beacon light. Stanton blinked and squinted. Was that the beacon or the sun trying to break through. Maybe...

"No." He growled aloud, dared not think more trouble for himself, had not strayed from his course. The time beacon was there. Still—

He tugged up a heavy coat sleeve. The time tracking unit on his wrist, a flexible bronze-colored band, showed a string of readouts in glowing symbols. *Present: June 10, 1999*, it read. But *which* June and *which* 1999? *Reference: June 16, 2259. Time in passage: 4000 Nante units*. He calculated differences although he knew the answer. Assuming base atomic change continued at the same rate within time paradox's surge as it did outside surge, then, measured against base records for the day surge storm swept him from hard time into paradox, he had spent ten years to this day lost in a state of no time at all where dates and calculations were human failings of reason and his body, knowing better, never aged.

Wind buffeted him and pattered rain against his coat. He shivered, startled by a thought, searched about. But the sky was only cottony and leaden, wasn't like *the day* . . . when the heavens turned electric-orange, translucent pink, and rot-meat purple. That day, his hair rose on his head and writhed about his crotch. Winds screamed to life in a single breath and lightning tore the cloudless sky side-to-side. He had run. But no one could outrun time, no matter which way time ran.

Now, here, he shivered in his saddle again. Here and now, time only circled while his rain-weighted shoulders ached. Sometimes, he wished his heart would stop, that everything would stop. But if he stopped, he would lose his time line, and in losing his line, he would lose any chance of finding home.

Fingers trembling, he wiped rain from the face of his tracker. *Status: In Transit*. His neck muscles twinged. All these wasted years—not unlined years, just useless—and his status never changed, the tracker never once read *In Flux* let alone *Point of Origin*. Ten years? It didn't make sense. No one stayed in surge

this long. The longest known absence of a returnee was seven years. Rain leaked down Stanton's neck. He didn't fight it, only let his head hang lower. His time *had* to come. Time *was* change. So, how could his life not change? Or how could he *live yet not change*? But some people never returned to hard time. Was he dead?

The gray slipped. Stanton woke himself. Below, trapped in the stream's raging current, rafts of driftwood exploded against boulders and formed jagged mats in eddies. The gray worked up a bank, skidded on the downslope, rocked back on its haunches. As Stanton rolled with the jolt, pain blossomed in the small of his back, and a dull ache began its familiar climb upward. Maybe tonight he would let himself sleep deep, too deep, slip away—

The gray whickered and shadows rose out of the rain. The other riders had stopped to rest. At a low spot in the stream bank, Stanton slid to ground and slumped wobbly-kneed against the gray's steamy side. Each of his breaths was forced around the pain of spasmed back muscles.

Verl and Shanghai dismounted near Stanton, stumping and limping as they loosened girths and watered their muddy mounts. Toab, a recent addition to this surge line, slopped past leading his horses to forage. Stanton let his gray drink at the ford they had reached and thought how he no longer bothered with an extra mount. Over *time*, one horse lasted a longer ride than he did. If he pushed his mount, he pushed himself. If he had learned anything, it was pacing his body to last another day. He was very good at it now, and had, of course, met no one else who had lasted so long in transit.

Ten years? The days were getting harder or else he was getting slower. If he was slower—He quit that line of thought. *Slow* was a hard time term and meant nothing in surge. But then, did anything mean anything in a place where you could change worlds by sleeping too late? Did anything mean anything?

He would not give up. Hang on, he thought. Anniversaries always depressed him, but tomorrow would be easier.

Turning the gray away from the water, he checked the horse's hooves. Straightening, he stroked its neck and let it shove its head beneath his slicker. "Tired, pal?"

The gray snuffled Stanton's shirt. He fed the gelding dry grass seed from his coat pocket and slipped the horse's bit freeing it to graze. Carrying his saddlebags, he took shelter in a stand of firs. Verl and Shanghai moved up and they three squatted with their backs to a broad tree trunk.

"Sore?"

Verl's question startled Stanton. The burly redhead seldom spoke. Their stories of old jobs and old lives had been told

Absolute Magnitude

before. Some men never tired of talking, but those moved to a different rhythm and never stayed long on this line.

Stanton puffed wet from his mustache and nodded.

Verl blew his nose to one side. "Sun'll shine tomorrow."

"Hiisshh." Shanghai lay a hand on Stanton's arm and stared into the rain.

Against the *shush* of pattering drops, Stanton sensed more than heard hoofbeats. Then to his left, along the animal track they had followed here, sodden air shimmered to mist, lightened, and whorled. A rider came through.

The horse stood tall and black, well-muscled. Its head was neat, its ears alert in spite of the rain. Its rider rode head-up too, aware, Stanton thought, that the black trod a new ripple, had shoaled onto another line of paradox.

The rider reined to a stop at the stream, slid down, and tended his horse before pulling back into the trees, hunting dry ground. Stanton's gray ignored the stud's approach. So Stanton let the gelding be. Bulky in rain gear, the new rider picked a spot and held the black's head until Verl and Shanghai's mares settled back to grazing.

No one offered greeting. Tugging a leather pouch from a saddlebag, the rider freed the black and walked toward Stanton.

"Trade." The stranger spoke low, voice oddly husky, yet high pitched.

Stanton opened his own saddlebag and extended a pouch of jerky, dried fruit, and nuts. Verl and Shanghai leaned nearer.

The stranger took Stanton's pouch and he took the stranger's in trade. Opening it, Stanton found two chocolate candy bars, tinned meat, and a package of vanilla cookies.

"Unequal." Stanton held the pouch out to the rider.

"Equal enough." The stranger squatted, hunkered over Stanton's jerky, and refused return of the elaborate trade.

Stanton's breath quickened and his heart lightened while his stomach did a dance. As he turned to Verl and Shanghai, a smile creased his cheeks in unfamiliar arcs. Verl would die for chocolate. "Look." He held out the trade bag.

The pair hunched at Stanton's shoulders and Shanghai groaned. Stanton pulled off damp gloves, broke the other-time sweets into pieces, and passed around shares.

When he glanced at the new rider, the stranger was chewing a strip of jerky, his features hidden by shadow. No one objected that the rider watched them. Accepting unequal trade bought the stranger rights to share their space.

Verl tasted his candy and Stanton couldn't tell if rain or tears wet the big man's stubbled cheeks.

"Here." Stanton offered the stranger a piece of chocolate.

The rider took it with a gloved hand. "Thanks."

The odd huskiness of the stranger's voice struck Stanton again. He eyed the rider. Was . . .

Stanton's vision blurred and a trickle of disorientation pimpled his spine. *Now . . . please now.*

But he blinked, and rain drizzled, trees drooped, and nothing looked changed. Verl and Shanghai licked their fingers. Twisting about, Stanton counted the other riders and came up with this morning's tally. So the disturbance ripple he had just felt had not been strong enough to take anyone. But something had occurred, and in some moment, his time would come.

He broke the key from the bottom of the meat tin he had traded for, and his fingers trembled as he peeled the thin metal strip from around the can's lip. Breaking the metal-wrapped key free, he stored it. The key was curiosity enough to enter into trade. Then with his belt knife, he cut the tinned meat into three servings. It tasted of salt and smoke. Verl and Shanghai grinned. Saliva squirted beneath Stanton's tongue. He had eaten enough wild game to last him all their lifetimes.

They ate everything. Old riders never saved back. Tomorrow there might be no one to share with, or even tonight, or in the next breath. Stashing the trade pouch in his saddlebag, Stanton stood and his stiffened muscles cramped and fired pain up his back. Ten years?

He leaned on a tree while feeling returned to his calves.

Ten years. Truth shattered the pleasure gleaned from his unexpected meal. He was falling off the pace. Today, tomorrow—if he didn't reach a stasis point soon—So he could lay down and rest. —he would lose the other riders.

He blinked. Did that barkless snag look familiar?

No, he had never been here before. But how could time not work for him if he was constantly in a new place? And if location and progression meant nothing to time here, how could stasis points exist? One thing was certain, stasis points *did* exist—not always in the same spot or the same time, but shifting location from day-to-day rather than moment-to-moment as happened in the rest of the land. He closed his eyes against rain and mist and let his mind wander. It must be like continental drift, he thought, where one time plate overrode another, only the plates stuck in some places rather than sliding smoothly past. So long as those sticking points held, time stood still. He prayed for a stasis point to appear now, for the land to become minutely the same before hand as behind. That was stasis, and so long as it held, a person could sleep and sleep until time rippled—just as the unsticking of a geologic plate caused ground quakes—and land-change warned you to move on or else fall off your time line. Not that you couldn't rest, but never for longer than overnight or you would lose the pace, and never catch up to the other riders chasing individual time targets that they just might attain if they rode hard enough and win their way home to their own hard times.

"Thanks." Verl's voice roused Stanton.

Stanton nodded and pushed away from the tree.

He found Shorty still sitting. Eyes red-rimmed, face haggard, the old man stank of sweat and dog piss. Stanton squatted beside Shorty. Two glassy button-eyes glowed from a dark hollow of Shorty's stained slicker.

Shorty needed more than a stasis point. If his status didn't change soon, the old man would waste away here. What happened to a soul then? Stanton's hard time religion demanded burial on native ground. Maybe Shorty's didn't. Maybe like time, there was no religion in surge.

Stanton stuck the meat tin under Shorty's nose. The old man's eyes rounded and his lower jaw drooped. Hand shaking, Shorty set the tin in front of the balding mutt on his lap. The dog pushed up on stiffened forelegs, stuck his snout in the can, licked a bit of jelly into a toothless mouth, and raised foggy eyes to Stanton. A soft *whap-whapping* of wagging tail sounded inside Shorty's coat. Elmer never got older, but never got younger either. Dog and master had entered surge looking forward to a death that never arrived.

"There now. Good for you." Shorty patted Elmer's head and waved Stanton off. "You know."

Stanton found his gelding nuzzling the new rider's stud. What surge was the gray riding? Stanton jerked his mount away from the stud, reset the gray's bit, tightened its saddle cinch, and swung up, teeth gritted as pain that shot up his spine.

If he could just get warm, the muscles would relax. He moved out slow, holding the gray to gentle strides and praying that rain slowed the other riders too. At the stream ford, water splashed his boots and wind whipped rain in his face. When the gelding climbed the opposite bank, mud splattered and plopped. Riding out jolts, Stanton eased his weight over his saddle pommel and let the day dissolve back into gray isolation.

Thunder rumbled and Stanton straightened in his saddle with a jerk. At the move, pain brought him fully awake.

The rain had stopped. Ahead, riders straggled across open meadow. Beyond the leaders, jagged rock humped into the clouds. Surely—Stanton's chest ached to the rhythm of his heartbeat—they would stop before tackling that climb.

"Tired?"

Stanton startled and pain squeezed his lungs as the stranger on the black stallion who had arrived during the last rest stop eased alongside his gray. Stanton forced a breath, but didn't answer. He could though. The thought fluttered his stomach. This rider had never heard his stories, maybe didn't even know what a land warden was or . . .

"You shared it all."

Stanton grunted into the damp and growing dark.

The rider said, "How long?"

No one ever asked that and the rider's high-pitched voice filled Stanton with confusing resonances. What should he say?

"A surge took me," the rider said, "caught me in my fields."

Stanton didn't need to hear more. Except for dates and places, surge time stories were all the same, even his. The sky filled with roiling bruise-colored clouds. The wind howled, yet nothing moved beyond the air that tore at clothes and hair and sanity. Then visually, the world fractured into a hundred repetitions of every object while shadows grew all around, closed down tighter and tighter. *A surge took me*, riders said.

The stranger reined around a rotting stump. "I didn't notice any other women traveling this line."

"Women?" The word startled from Stanton's throat.

"Yes." The rider flipped back his . . . *her* . . . *her* hat. Dark hair cascaded over her slicker's shoulders and she smiled, white teeth glinting in the dusk, features not delicate, but very feminine. "I don't know why I kept crossing into male lines."

Stanton's reins slipped free, tangled in the grass, and the gray stopped to graze. "Allie?" His vision blurred.

"No." The woman sat taller. "Sorry."

He blinked. No, this wasn't Allie. Eight years had passed, yet he still tasted Allie's delicate beauty. A month they'd had before she rippled right out of his sleeping arms and disappeared into another time. Neither man nor woman could ride an opposite sex line long. The rhythms were too different. He and she had known, but pretended otherwise, pretended denial could defeat the older riders' sure knowledge.

This woman raised one arm, pulled back her coat sleeve, and checked her status tracker. He wanted to touch her, but checked his tracker instead. It read, *In Transit*.

His eyes flipped up and away. Ahead, the lead riders had shifted course toward a stand of scraggly pines. He groped for his dropped reins, kicked the gray's withers. The horse ambled a step, still grazing, then stopped again. Oh fates. His back wouldn't bend, so he couldn't reach the reins and was being left behind. He stared into deepening dusk. Verl and Shanghai might miss him.

"*Tia*." His voice died in the dusk and his hands shook on his saddle pommel.

"It's all right." The woman's fingers brushed his and warmth shot through his hand. "Just sit." Bending low, she gathered his reins and tugged the gray into motion.

They reached camp as the others—bedrolls scattered beneath the trees—coaxed campfires to life. She led the gray to a vacant space, dismounted, and turned in time to catch Stanton as he slipped to the ground. Though he stood tall, her head reached his chin, and she steadied him with hard muscle as well as weight. It took a strong woman to ride the surge, he thought, and a harder one to ride a male line.

He slid down onto his coat tails. She spread a ground cloth and tipped him onto it. Shadow trapped him.

"You alive?"

Stanton blinked and came awake. Where had he—

"Here." She propped his dripping canteen beside his head. "I filled it."

He scrunched onto one elbow. "Thank you."

"Are you techno?" Balanced on one knee, the woman began scraping out a fire pit.

He tucked up his sleeve and revealed his status tracker.

"That looks like a level four, about?" She raised one eyebrow. "Me too. I've never met a level five. Have you?"

"Once." He cleared his throat, flexing seldom used muscles.

"Once a guy dropped in for dinner."

Absolute Magnitude

"Figures," She smiled. "People always show up in time to eat your food, eh?"

"Yeah." Stanton tried to smile back.

"Well? Did he have a theory?"

"He talked about chaotic event horizons and focal meshes. I couldn't grasp it. Come morning, he was gone."

"You think he went back?"

"Maybe." Stanton shook his head. "He understood more than the rest of us and he had an advanced tech tracker. But I don't think he was any less lost or scared."

"So—" Her gloved hands dug deep into thin soil. "You have a theory? Are we in Heaven or Hell?"

"Limbo." What else could you call surge?

"Source? Or do we agree that we are in a time storm?"

"We agree. I—" Stanton cleared his throat. Women talked a lot as he remembered them. No, he talked a lot to women, once. "I, uh, favor wave-eddy as a source." He shifted to ease the pressure on his spine. "I like the idea of deep space derelicts spinning into a megamass that creates a U-Shax Anomaly . . . like some toppled Babbling Tower?"

"Tower of Babel."

"What?" Stanton sensed he was babbling himself.

"Wave-eddy?" She shook her head and positioned a rock for the hearth she was building. "That's sort of the old Voodooian casualty violation theory, right? Where massive rotating cylinders cause spatial time paradoxes."

"Yeah." Stanton nodded.

"Well—" She pulled a handful of tender from her inside coat pocket and piled it at the center of the dirt depression she had scraped out for a hearth. "I like the alien technology run amok idea myself; especially where the aliens are all dead and their ship keeps sending out waves of effect, causing surge storms as it spins toward implosion. *Boom.*" Her hands slapped together as if sucked by imaginary force.

He thought about aliens, as in non-humans. "Doesn't it bother your theory that no one has ever found any aliens?" He wriggled after a softer spot for his hips.

"No." She smiled. "You have family?"

He shrugged. "You?"

"A husband. Maybe."

Stanton hated the *maybe*. But time passed in the hard world. Things changed there that they couldn't know about.

He blinked at her. "What did you do?"

"I was a botanical agronomist. I like to grow rare things."

He tried to match her smile, couldn't, and his mind blurred and spun wild. "Maybe," he breathed against the pain of a throbbing temple, "maybe we're all computer scum and have been translated into random smart juice streams inside a universal data network."

"I like that." Firelight flickered through the trees and stained her face with shadow and red glow. "I like that a lot." Her head cocked. "I could work this out. Like . . . when someone keys the comp system, we experience a surge storm; and if they're

asking for the data molecule we're riding on, the system spits us out again. That's how returnees get home again, but they haven't aged, because their data hasn't changed." She nodded. "But if we stop, we fall out of the data stream, become systematic pathogens, and begin to break down. Oooh, that's not *ba-a-d*. Did your scientists think that up? Or is it a returnee vision?"

"Personal dementia."

She laughed, flat and short while she stacked sticks and cones for her fire. She must have gathered the fire kindling while he slept. Had he . . . He studied the men at the next nearest fire. No—his head sagged—he hadn't rippled, had just taken a nap without going anywhere.

"We need more wood." She stood, wiped her hands on her pants. "Rest."

A boot nudged Stanton's shoulder. "Hungry?" The woman towered over him.

He blinked and sat up. "I drifted again, huh?"

She shoved her rolled saddle blanket behind his back for support. "You weren't out for long. You're stable."

He relaxed. She understood. He hated the moments between waking and true sleep when the mind lay vulnerable to surge disorder. More than one friend had forgotten him overnight. Who had he forgotten?

"Why help me?" He arched a shoulder against pain.

"Why not?" She knew what he meant.

"You won't be here long enough for me to repay you food let alone anything else."

"Doesn't matter."

It did if helping him tired her. But a person had to nurture more than body to hold the pace. That's why he had shared his food with Verl and Shanghai this afternoon. Human beings needed social contact. So he had chanced that personal interaction and held onto it for as long as he dared. But old riders learned not to draw too close to anyone.

The woman leaned over Stanton and lowered her lips to the hollow of his throat. He needn't ask what trade she wanted.

"That ain't likely tonight, lady."

"Which is why I chose you." Her smile was disconcerting. Her lips brushed his cheek.

He shifted, testing whether he might manage. But pain fired up his back and his stomach roiled. "I look safe, do I?" He forced a smile.

"Yes."

"And what's to stop someone else coming after you?"

"Me." She shrugged. "Besides, you're an old rider. This whole line is old . . . balanced. No one wants trouble. They might not mind breaking me, but won't come after you."

"Who says I'll try to stop them?"

"Your eyes."

He hated her assuming on his good will. It implied ties neither of them dared make. "You're a fool."

"An old fool."

Absolute Magnitude

"You're saying, we belong in surge? This is forever?"

"What is forever in surge? Maybe we've become resident data bits? Or maybe we're moving so close to the speed of light that we've become stationary within this line."

Thoughts blatted him.

"Look—" Her fingers squeezed his harder. "Everything we know about surge comes from those people who return. But they haven't spent ten years in here or reached an *End Transit* while still in surge. So what can they know about it? Even this—" She waved her status tracker. "This is made by people who only guess at the parameters of surge paradox. They *know* nothing. Anything can be true, anything can happen."

He caught her free hand and gripped it as hard as she gripped his. "Which means—" His voice scaled upwards. "—I can go on and still work my way back to my beginning portal. I could still find a way home."

Her bottom lip sucked in, then escaped bloodied between fine white teeth. "You could." Her breath sighed. "You might. Or maybe we've just rippled so many times that we've found a point in surge so like our own hard time . . ." She shook her head. "Something matches our origination points here. I think that we've reached a place where we can survive without returning home. But you're right, maybe now you're freer than ever to go on and find the true way out."

Trembling started at his heart and spread to his limbs until she vibrated with him. He had a choice?

"Which way is on?" He shook her. "How do I go on without the tracker telling me which way that is?"

Her dark eyes were fathomless. Her mouth half opened then shut as a tear slid down her cheek.

He tried denial. "My tracker is broken is all."

The breeze lifted a strand of her hair. He wanted to hate her. She didn't want him to go. She might not have wished this on him, yet she wasn't sorry it had happened.

"I have to get home." He shook her again. But ten years of riding had only gotten him here. Would a hundred take him anywhere better? He bit his bottom lip. He knew the answer. He would never reach home in time to live with Tia or Wren.

"We just rode so damn long." Her voice hoarsened. "We're trapped. We didn't do anything wrong."

He tasted blood . . . had known, really, for a long time.

"You don't have to stay with me, maybe you can't." Her bottom lip trembled. "But you don't have to rush anymore either. There's no place to go."

No place to go.

The sun climbed the sky.

He wrapped his arms about her and drew her onto his lap. Birds flew and tears dripped from his chin. Tia forgave him, but surge or hard time, future or past, it was stopping time. The ache in his back eased. He breathed deep and deeper.

"What do you do?"

She leaned away to stare up into his face. "I live one day at a time, make time to rest, and take time to think."

"I've thought too much already."

"There is no already. There's only now."

His mouth opened, then closed. Grass sighed and shifted with the breeze. "Now," he said, "implies future."

"If you want to believe that."

Sunshine gleamed in her eyes. He pressed his lips to her forehead and held her as if there were a tomorrow.

This Sporting Life from page 45

Von Baldur was on his com:

"Captain Hook, this is Star Risk. Commence operation. . . now! Child Rowland. . . we are in trouble. Come in as soon as you can."

"This is Hook. On the way in."

"Child Rowland, beginning dive."

The stadium was a melee of fighting men and women. Goodnight heard a gunshot, then another, didn't know where they came from.

The man behind the rocket launcher was taking his time, making sure.

Goodnight's hand brushed his jaw, and the world around him slowed, and the noise rose in pitch.

Now the people around him were blurring, and he was darting through them, like a hummingbird through flowers.

The rocket man never even saw him as Goodnight cannoned into him, sending the sight crashing away.

But the man's finger was pressing the firing stud, and the rocket launched, smashing across the stadium and exploding in the middle of the crowd.

As the screams started, a Type VIII Heavy Lifter starship, a massive oblong carrying a large hook at the end of its drag hovered over the stadium. The hook reeled out and caught fast on the framework of the antigrav generators on the roof.

"Captain Hook," on the bridge of the Lifter Star Risk had chartered, ordered full power, and a 30° up angle. The ship, intended for the heaviest construction/demolition, barely strained as it tore away the stadium's roof in a ragged curl.

"This is Hook, Child Rowland. You got any problem with the sheet metal?"

"That's a largish negatory. Coming in."

Goodnight came out of better, saw the three rocket launcher men gaping at him. One was reaching for a gun.

Goodnight's blaster was out, and crashing.

Three men pinwheelled, went down.

Goodnight put an additional round into the prostrate rocket aimer's head just to make sure, and was running, leaping, down the stadium steps.

Riss and King were already on the field, as von Baldur was halfway down the steps.

The stadium was filling with smoke and flame, and then the

Continued on page 57

The Bus Driver

by James Keenan

Copyright © James Keenan 2006

An alarm wailed. Micah opened his eyes and reached in vain for the bunk straps. The ship was still accelerating, a g and a half towards Saturn, and he hadn't strapped himself in last night. He clawed the covers off his bare chest and stumbled to the terminal.

"Emergency," the computer said. "Vital signs failure. Simulation module."

Micah's head cleared. "What's wrong?"

"Vital signs failure."

"Who? Is life support functioning?"

"Lead Programmer Subedei. Ship systems are normal."

He scratched the stubble on his square face. The engine rumble and slight vibration coming up through the deck seemed normal. Micah considered asking the computer if it could be another sensor failure but how would it know?

He pulled on track pants and a black sweat top. The sleeves snagged over his thick forearms. He squeezed through a hatch and bounced down the gantry. His thighs flexed under the extra weight.

* In the galley, the stench of burnt coffee filled his nose. Had Bob left a pot stewing again? Earthers. Micah pushed his annoyance aside to recall CPR. Breathing, circulation, and what was the third? It would come to him if he needed it.

He crawled into the simulation module and forgot all about it. Subedei had been wearing an interface headset. The Mark EC robot stood before him on hind legs, its battery pack tail lowered for balance. Its LEDs and cameras were dead. The slim effector limbs were lowered but its port side main arm was still extended.

The robot had crushed the headset and Subedei's skull.

Micah threw up. He wiped his face and punched the main alarm.

Four of them, the ship's entire complement, sat at the dining table. Sarita was to Micah's left and he caught a whiff of jasmine. Her stick-thin arms hugged her torso and the whites of her eyes were so bright they seemed to shine.

Across from him, Bob sucked on a mint. A button had popped on his shirt and a roll of flab peeked out. His eyes were half lidded and his lips curled.

The only one wearing a company issue jumper was Darius. He kept his back as straight as the spikes on his blond buzzcut. "The Corporation has responded to my report," Micah said. "They want us to—"

"Download the EC's program and transmit it to headquarters," Bob interrupted. "I did so as soon as I saw the mess. Funny, I'd always thought of Subedei as bloodless."

Darius smiled and Sarita kept her features blank.

"Was a long running?" Micah asked.

"Of course." Bob picked at a tooth with his thumbnail.

"I'd like one of you to play it for me."

"What for?"

"Headquarters wants me to investigate."

Bob threw his head back and laughed.

"Typical," he said. "Ask the pilot to do it, the only one not qualified to diagnose the failure. If there was a janitor on board he'd—"

"There's some logic to it," Darius said. "You, me, or Sarita could have messed with the EC. Mr. bus driver," Darius nodded to Micah, "doesn't know how."

"How to do what?" Micah asked.

"Execute our leader."

"Perhaps it was an accident."

"Robots do what you tell them to," Darius said. "I'll show you the video."

They climbed into the sim module. Darius was puffing.

The Mark EC stood frozen with its killing arm at its side. Its screens were blank. A transparent plastic shell covered its torso. Micah noticed that all the memory card slots on its motherboard were full. A nest of cables trailed from its head to the computers lining the room.

Darius sat before a large screen terminal and scanned the files. He found what he wanted and selected play.

Text displayed yesterday's date. The screen showed the same room they stood in, with the Mark EC front and center. Subedei appeared before it and winked at the camera, his lashes long and dark. He was lean, with skin like horsehide. He pulled on the headset.

They watched Subedei plug a cable into the EC's face and don a control glove. He touched a keyboard with his bare left hand and the screen on the EC's chest brightened. Subedei pressed another button and holographs lit up around the robot. They looked to Micah like orange clouds filled with symbols.

"What's he doing?" Micah asked.

"He's accessed the EC's program," Darius squinted as he followed Subedei's quick movements. His gloved hand stabbed or stroked the holos to make them expand for viewing or fade into the background. Subedei drew a string of holographic light from one cloud of text to another like a spider stringing web between tree branches.

Darius cursed in Russian. Micah questioned him with a glance.

"I wrote that ore cataloging procedure," Darius clenched his fist. "Subedei altered one of my instructions."

"Isn't that his job?"

"He never scrutinized Bob or Sarita's code."

Subedei pressed a button and a second holographic pattern appeared, a grid of opaque, black lines. They punctured the

Absolute Magnitude

orange text like building girders in a thin fog. Micah knew enough of robot intelligence to guess that it was a display of the base code. Subedei peered at a junction between base code and program and then flicked the grid off.

The Mark EC had been as immobile as the furniture. It stood up and lowered its tail. Subedei stabbed at a patch of holographic code thrice and grunted in surprise. The robot's main camera focused on him.

The EC took one stride. Its servos whined. It raised an arm and slammed it down on Subedei so swiftly the man didn't even flinch.

Darius stopped the recording.

The com module was a cylinder full of arrays and displays. Micah and Bob were forced together as if they stood in a small elevator. Micah wondered how long the chocolate had been smeared on Bob's chin. It appeared hardened.

"Have you run your diagnosis?" Micah asked.

"I've checked the subs, interfaces, every line of code. I sent headquarters a copy but they won't find the cause."

"Why not?"

"There's nothing to find. The hack must have erased itself after... the event."

"Oh."

Bob scratched his privates. "A masterful hack. It shouldn't be possible to tamper with the base code and not leave traces."

"Doesn't the base code prevent a robot from harming people?"

"It contains the three laws and autonomic subs."

"Obviously a programmer corrupted it."

Bob sighed. "I forget your ignorance, bus driver. You can't override the base code. You can't even access it from the program level."

"Why not?"

"They're independent systems; the signals have different micro-voltages."

"Can you think of any incentive anyone might have to?"

"Motive, you mean? If you're pretending to be a sleuth get the terms right. Subedei's demise made me rich. Same with Sarita and Darius."

"How?"

"Lead programmers divide the team bonuses up as they see fit. Subedei kept the sweetest stock options and only paid us salaries and profit shares."

"Why sign up with him?"

"He seized the best projects. Ten percent on his team paid more than forty percent on anyone else's."

"But the project is in jeopardy. You're one programmer short."

"Subedei had finished the resource and duty plan. All he intended to do on Titan was to 'keep the whip to our flanks' and act as backup."

"I've asked headquarters if we should return to Lagrange."

Micah scraped his fingernails on the communications console.

"They'll pass that transmission around and mock your naiveté. The project is a go."

"With you as lead programmer?"

"We don't need one. The Titan stationmaster will do the status reports. The three of us have agreed on our duties and bonus split. I take forty five percent."

Micah sputtered. "When did you decide that? Why do you get more?"

"We negotiated while you were cleaning up the body. That must have been gross. It looks like there's still blood under your fingernails."

"As for my cut, if this tub was a hospital I'd be a neurosurgeon, Sarita an intern, and Darius a scrub nurse."

Micah stepped closer and looked down at Bob.

"You seem unfazed that one of your coworkers could be a killer. What if you're next?"

Bob reached suddenly and squeezed Micah's bicep.

"Oh, what a strong brute you are. You make me want to confess." He giggled. "Reason it out. The project would fail if anyone else died, especially me."

"Could the hack have been embedded in the factory?"

"It would have to have been slick to slip past the qualification testing."

The control cabin was a sphere with a single chair which Micah sat on. He adjusted the main viewer's tint to bring out the blue in the nebula he was staring at. It was stunning. His wristwatch beeped. He lowered his eyes to the console and read a swarm of neon graphs and alphanumeric characters at a glance.

He pressed an alarm, counted to ten, and shut down the main engines. Somebody cursed from the gantry.

Darius floated into the cabin. He was rubbing his head.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"I rang the alarm. I explained this at—"

"Never mind." Darius grabbed a hand hold and arched his back. "This will give my spine a rest."

"Not for long." Micah fired the side thrusters. A hiss sounded and the stars moved. "As soon as I get her turned about we start deceleration."

Darius grunted and stretched further. Micah noticed that he was slim but soft, a desk robbing the tone from his muscles. At least Darius paid some attention to the console. Bob seemed to view the ship as full of toys to prod and break. And as fond as he was of Sarita, Micah could picture her floating past a hull breach without turning her head.

He hated to think of how they'd get home if he were incapacitated.

"You want to know if I had Subedei's head caved in?"

Darius held his arms out like a skydiver. "His demise cheers me. I can use the extra bonus. But the hack was beyond me."

The Bus Driver

"Beyond Bob or Sarita?"

"I'd guess a factory fault."

"Headquarters ran an audit. The supplier swears that our EC was flawless and they have verification test records to prove it."

"Maybe the EC became conscious." Darius bugged his eyes out in mock fear. "Better not turn your back on it."

Micah didn't smile. "Subedei was rude, even for an Earther. But you seemed to despise him most."

Darius floated to a console. He switched to Subedei's internal home page. The graphic depicted two Mongol warriors, circa Ghengis Khan.

"Do you know what this means?" Darius asked.

"Subedei was proud of his heritage."

"They're eating dinner on top of a large box. You failed to notice? The observant detective."

Micah took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. A tight ball of anger remained in his stomach.

Darius rapped the screen. "Russia, near the Kalka River, after Mongol invaders crushed the resisting armies. Those two are Ghengis' generals. Inside the air tight box are three Russian princes. They're suffocating to death. The Mongols considered it unseemly to spill a respected, captive's blood."

"You care about ancient history?"

"Subedei did." Darius' voice rose a half octave. "He undervalued my programming because I started as a hardware technician. He said he was my personal Mongol yoke."

"Folks sometimes confuse the intensity of an emotion with its justification."

Micah was alone in the com module. His limbs were still warm from his daily workout. He sprawled before a terminal waiting for the message from headquarters. A light blinked green.

"Computer, display encryption applications. Select ConSeal."

"Please verify."

He pressed his thumb onto the pad and the computer granted him access.

A big face that didn't belong to his manager appeared on the screen. The man's diamond nose stud was in the shape of the Corporation's logo. An executive. He lectured, his voice like an unsharpened saw.

"...collapse of our pharmaceutical division, the find, unexpected as it was, is projected to be our primary revenue source for the coming two fiscal years."

The executive paused to glare, presumably to let the magnitude of the information sink in. Micah burped at the screen.

"Your priorities are as follows. Deliver the programmers and their pods. Deliver the EC and the other supplies. Determine the cause of the EC's aberrant behaviour."

"You must have proof beyond all doubt before accusing anyone with inappropriate conduct. If you must speculate,

double encrypt your report. Do not contact the media except through an authorized public relations officer."

Micah became aware of ragged breathing behind him. He turned to see Darius grinning.

"Headquarters doesn't want to know who did it," Darius said. "The prudent choice would be to blame the factory. They'll certainly be accusing us."

"I will catch the murderer, not record memos."

"There's no bonus in it."

"Some of us are here to build a future for humanity. This killing is an affront to that effort."

"What an eccentric you are. The Corporation pays more if they believe that you hate your job."

Micah imagined bouncing Darius around the cabin. He let his pulse slow. "Why is everyone certain that it was software? Maybe a chip failed."

"The EC didn't flail its arms randomly, it completed a complex task and erased a file."

"You're sure it couldn't be hardware?"

"Bob ran a systems check."

"That's as deep as you can go?"

Darius rolled his eyes.

"You could tweak each card and self test every chip, but it would be a waste of effort. A cap out of tolerance wouldn't explain its behaviour."

Micah banged on Sarita's hatch. His fist was getting sore. She unlocked it, Sony Walkman plugs still in her ears, and he stepped into her pod.

Posters covered the walls. A print of a river as dark as wine with Indian bathers crowding the shore obscured the porthole.

"Saturn is glowing like a lamp tonight," Micah said. He held the edge of the print and raised an eyebrow. She shook her head no.

"I'd rather look at the Godavari." She crossed her legs and pulled the hem of her shorts as far down her thighs as they would go, which wasn't far. "I don't need reminding that I'm in a foul smelling can surrounded by darkness." She shuddered and her Cambridge University T-shirt rippled.

"Did Subedei ever come on to you?"

"Continually." She sighed at his expression. "Frontier posts aren't neo-Victorian like Lunar. Less than one in forty programmers is female. We're under intense pressure."

"To, uh, date the men?"

"To at least pick one of them. They get surly if you keep to yourself."

"Are you glad that he's dead?"

"The job will be no harder and much more lucrative."

"Money. If headquarters thought it profitable to strip mine Saturn's rings they'd do it."

"What are you insinuating? My parents sold their house to finance my tuition. My salary feeds my sisters and brother."

"Sorry. That comment was directed at myself."

Absolute Magnitude

Micah didn't feel like asking questions. Sarita made tea and he drank a cup. It was hot and smelled peculiar. He told her that it was superb.

"I miss Lagrange," he said. "Bartering jobs with my friends. Everyone looking out for each other."

Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled. She told him about her grandma's home spun.

He stood to go. She reached up and stroked his hand.

Her lips glistened. He didn't make it to the hatch.

"Titan, here." The Stationmaster's voice was weak.

Micah leaned closer to the speaker and identified himself.

"Ten hours until orbit. Are you configured to receive the pods?"

"Affirmative," said the Stationmaster. Static crackled.

"I'm not reading you."

There was a whistle and the stationmaster's voice returned.

"Micah, be certain to check their micro environments. The programmers will be in the pods for hours before we retrieve them and their radios won't cut through the interference."

"Affirmative."

"Drop Subedei's pod too."

"Why?"

"We're nose to butt down here. An empty pod to add to our station is a Godsend."

"Everybody's pleased that he's dead."

Bob ripped open a wrist flap on his programming glove and examined the logic. He reset a chip and closed the flap. He wore a blue T-shirt and orange sweatpants. Micah judged him to be in peak form - burping, scratching, and farting in an asynchronous pattern.

"Figured out the hack yet?" Micah asked.

"The murderer is on Earth - probably didn't know which one of us would be slaughtered. Or maybe it was a joke gone wrong, a hack to make the EC dance a tango."

Micah's back was against a hatch. The EC's camera was pointing at him. He shuffled to one side.

"Is headquarters aware that you're reactivating it without knowing?"

"Of course," Bob stabbed a touch pad and the EC lit up in an LED bonfire.

"Is there an emergency stop?"

"Don't wet your pants," Bob flexed his gloved fingers. He pulled the headset over his ears and activated the holographs. A black matrix and clouds of orange surrounded the EC.

Micah brushed the hatch handle with his left hand. The EC's starboard camera whirled as it focused on him. He stared back without blinking.

Bob touched an orange subroutine. It burst open. His fingers flicked through the code.

The EC's main arms shot up and down as if it were doing calisthenics. It stopped. A control panel suspended on a mini

hoist waited by the wall. Bob hauled it in front of the EC. He stroked another command.

Three of the EC's effector arms writhed over the control panel. The display scrolled text too fast for Micah to read.

Bob faced the log camera.

"The EC has completed test program A-5. I'm going to"

One of the effector arms shot out like a rattler and whipped around Bob's wrist. It tugged.

Micah rushed forward. He grabbed the effector arm and hauled with all his might. He may as well have been trying to snap a power line.

Their feet slid on the deck. The EC pulled them close. They were within range of the main arms now, which could lift tons. Micah grunted. Veins popped out on his forearms.

Bob belly laughed. He flicked a subroutine with his free hand and the robot released him.

"You should see your face, trying to wrestle an EC."

Micah's eyes burned. He lowered his chin and flexed his knuckles. He could fracture Bob's jaw with one punch.

"Why are you such a jerk?"

Bob bowed to the log camera. "Because I can be. I earn thirty times what you do and the Corporation indulges me."

The decompression chamber was a long, smooth tube. A screen counted down the pressure in glowing red letters.

Micah curled his toes. His suit squeezed his chest like a wrestler. He had told the company clerk, "extra large, V-cut" but this suit was a medium.

The letters turned green and the hatch slid open. He drifted into the waiting universe and stretched his limbs in clean vacuum.

Near the control cabin he had tethered a silver sample sack. Subedei lay inside, his body preserved. When would the man's family reply to his message? He hoped they'd agree to let him jettison the corpse and not drag it back to Earth.

Micah turned to Saturn. The equatorial bands made him think of a colossal candy. The knot in his neck muscles loosened.

Micah fired the pack and flew down the ship's main truss. He could see three of the four pods protruding like barnacles on the sim module. Touching down, he clamped his portable foot restraint onto the hull and stepped into it.

He bent to examine a pod. No meteor damage. He UV scanned the re-entry shield for cracks. They almost never missed the main continent and dumped pods in Titan's seas but you had to be ready.

A flash appeared to his side, by the ship. He jerked his head to track it but it was gone. It couldn't have been a meteor. The galley garbage dump? Saturn light reflecting off refuse?

Micah finished inspecting the pods. They were all set except for the air supply. He indulged himself in a drift, curving like a tadpole.

The Bus Driver

He decompressed, restarted the engines, and went to the com module. Two messages waited for him. The first was a large block of text, a response to his request for a complete self test of the EC's hardware. The header said that they had found something.

The second message was a reply/edit video. He told the computer to run it.

His face appeared on half the screen, delivering his last status report. The executive with the nose stud filled the other half. Micah's image froze and the executive spoke.

"You have failed to determine the cause of the incident."

Micah suppressed the urge to spit on the screen.

"The Corporation treats its employees with fairness and dignity. We cannot permit anyone to carry out their duties under a continual cloud of suspicion. Therefore, I have been authorized to terminate the investigation. Legal is issuing a contract addendum to each programmer absolving them of responsibility.

"The Corporate Sheriff's office will take no action and has waived the right to compulsory lie detection. The Corporation will refrain from passing the file on to civil authorities for charges or extradition or to the media."

The executive interrupted Micah's recording twice more, reminding Micah to refer to 'ISO Verbal Reporting Standards' to correct procedural infractions.

Micah stood. Unconsciously, he kept his weight centered as he turned under a one point three G load. His chair back was soft and curved and colored the Corporation's official purple. He fired a right cross and buried his fist in the padding.

He found Sarita in her pod. She looked up from her terminal, blinking.

"What the hell..." he punctuated the word with a slashing motion. "...did you three arrange?"

"We threatened to quit unless they either charged or exonerated us." Her eyes were focused on his chest and didn't shift. "Do you recall their refusal to pay the Array Technicians after somebody embezzled the—"

"His head was caved in."

"I will not endure six wretched months on an ice cube and give them an excuse to withhold my wages."

"Two of you are shielding a murderer."

"It's the Corporation's responsibility to police employees, not mine."

"Justice means nothing to headquarters."

"Your pay comes from the same cost center as mine."

"It makes me sick to think about it. I won't be renewing my contract."

"Micah." Her voice was a purr. "Don't fret about what's beyond your control."

"Don't be so sure it is. Have you ever jettisoned anything through the waste disposal?"

"That's your job."

The ship hung in orbit. Red and gray smears covered Titan. The sun ate away at its methane atmosphere with no sign of the violence. Micah was sweating inside his suit. It had been a

lengthy, complex EVA - something the Earth orbit union shops wouldn't have permitted.

Saturn swung into view. The inner rings shone like fresh snow and stopped Micah's breath. He could see stars through the Cassini Division.

He had stripped the ship to its main truss and launched spent fuel tanks and spare parts down to the outpost. Micah checked his air. He had enough for one last task.

A slab hung at right angles to the ship, secured on a boom. On its underside were silicate tiles and retro rockets. Small maneuvering thrusters ran along its edge. On top, the EC, naked in space, was strapped in place.

He set a molded plate over each of the robot's sensors and cameras and used his recoilless driver to attach them. They fit like masks. The EC's transparent torso shell had been replaced by alloy fiber.

"Ready," he said.

"Affirmative," the Stationmaster answered.

Micah released the clamps. He pressed a button and a puff of gas pushed the slab away. The EC looked oddly dignified, like a pagan god image on a funeral pyre.

Two other thrusters fired but Micah hadn't touched his control pad.

"We have control of the slab." A crackle interrupted the Stationmaster. "Aligning. Preparing for reentry."

Micah watched it shrink. The slab angled to present its underside to the moon as it dropped towards it. The EC was a smudge on its surface. He hadn't cleaned every spec of blood and tissue from the EC's hand. Re-entry would scour it clean. Micah returned to the ship.

The sim module seemed roomy without the robot. Micah pulled on a headset and a belt full of tools. He switched the computer to ship's systems and selected external cameras. The monitor gave him a split screen view of the four pods.

Sarita floated in. She was dressed in a working jumper with her hair pulled back tight. He brushed by her as he rechecked the seal on her pod's hatch and felt her breath on his neck - quick, nervous exhalations.

"Did you check your environmental system?"

"Three times," she answered. "I guess this is goodbye."

"I won't return to ferry you home. Sarita, it may take them hours to reach you. Try to relax, they'll be tracking every meter of your re-entry."

She touched his shoulder. He turned his back on her. He heard the hatch shut and flicked his headset on.

"Micah here. Pod One standing by."

"Titan here. Proceed."

Micah hit the command. He watched clamps release the pod and its thrusters fire. The pod was dead on course, its attack angle thirty four degrees as the Stationmaster had specified.

Bob was next. He was devouring a candy bar and had two more stuck in his shirt pocket. He maneuvered like a zeppelin and left a wake of chocolate flakes.

"Your environmental—"

"Don't nag, bus driver. I verified it all last night." He climbed into his pod and the launch went smoothly.

Absolute Magnitude

Micah heard the last programmer coming down the gantry. Darius didn't glance at him. He floated past and seized his pod's hatch. He cranked the handle. He cranked again harder and the immobile handle made his entire body spin like a second hand on a clock.

Darius cursed. "Unlock it." A muscle along his cheek flexed. "It was hardware and software."

Darius' eyes narrowed. Micah kept talking.

"Amongst the thousands of circuit tracks, the self test found one that didn't belong. You wired a transformer onto a card. It let your hack slip into the base code. You could make the EC do anything."

"Self tests are not always reliable. Did you repeat it?"

"I did but the altered card had been removed."

"Did you find it?"

"I searched the ship." Micah felt his adrenaline start to rush. His voice grew hoarse. "I checked your pod twice. The card is gone. You disposed of it when I was on an EVA."

"You have no proof and I have a solid agreement that the Corporation won't pursue the matter."

"How can you spout legalities?"

"Release the hatch."

"Murderer."

Darius glanced at the log camera and saw that the recording light was off.

"There's nothing you can do."

"I will leak my suspicions to the Corporate Sheriffs."

"They won't challenge the executives without proof."

"I'll find one that doesn't prostrate himself to headquarters."

Darius laughed. "Their department is the only one that's rewarded for failure. The Sheriffs can use an unsolved security breach to justify more staff, more power."

"You have no respect for the ethics needed out here. Your self absorption."

"Do you suppose that bluster can influence me? I've won. Your rage is impotent."

Micah's hands were like claws. His mind shifted, his reason fading to a detached, animal alertness. He jumped. He snagged a hand hold, jerked to a halt, and seized Darius' throat.

Darius didn't struggle. He hung like a puppet. Micah shook him and made him dance.

"Do you intend to strangle me?"

"You shouldn't get away with this."

"This is uncomfortable." Darius could only whisper.

"Ignorance of space will get you killed."

Darius smirked. Micah's anger drained away. He released him.

Darius straightened his shirt. "Open the hatch."

Micah glided to the computer and entered a code. He heard the hatch open and slam shut. He punched a command and felt the pod launch.

Micah caught his reflection in the monitor. His brow was furrowed. He rubbed his forehead but the skin wouldn't relax.

He looked at the radar. The pod was almost at the atmosphere. He used the headset.

"Darius? Come in?"

"What do you want bus driver?"

"You didn't check your air supply."

There was a pause. A scream began. Titan's thick atmosphere silenced it.

Micah floated. His chest was heaving. He switched to Subedei's home page and stared at the Mongols sitting on the box. It was hard to tell from their expressions if they could hear any noises from the dying Russians.

This Sporting life Continued from page 51

screams grew louder as an ex-Alliance heavy cruiser crashed through the hole in the roof, and came down, in a stately manner, toward the field, smashing everything blocking its way.

It filled the huge stadium from end to end.

A lock opened, and a ramp shot out.

Two men with blast rifles ran down the ramp, crouched, looking for a threat.

There was none. The mob was busy trampling itself, getting away from this sudden nightmare.

Jasmine and M'chel were pushing the seven referees toward the ramp, shouting at them.

Stunned, the striped men and women obeyed, stumbling up the ramp into the ship.

Grok came down the stairs, grabbed Freddie under one arm, backhanded a man waving a nail-studded club, heard his skull smash.

Goodnight was on the field, and the three reached the cruiser at the same time, pelting into it as the two guards came behind them, and the ramp and lock closed.

"Welcome aboard," the cultured voice said. "You're welcome to join me on the bridge. I do have a bill for you. A rather large one, I'm afraid."

"Not for me," Friedrich managed over his panting. "For the Professional Referees Association."

He looked at the shocked, gaping officials.

"They shall be delighted, nay thrilled, to add a 15, no 20% performance bonus to your fee."

"You said they were the generous type, Freddie. Bring 'em on up with you."

"We are on the way," von Balduz said. "I have a credit transfer to make, as well."

Chas, Jasmine and Grok were looking out of a port as the starship lifted out of the ruined stadium.

"As you said, Chas," Grok murmured. "Mess with our Jasmine, will they?"

Goodnight managed an exhausted smile.

"Jasmine, buy me a steak, hey? I need some stimulation, and this tub's gotta have a mess somewhere."

"Provided you don't get ideas," King said.

They started out of the lock area.

Riss took one more look back down at Warwick.

"It isn't winning," she said, thinking of the million-plus credits. "It's how the game is played."

Down to Earth

by Jo Walton

Copyright © Jo Walton 2006

The first thing I did on Earth was throw up. I mean, I weighed three times more than I ever had in my life before, and also I made the mistake of looking up. Believe me, if you're ever unfortunate enough to be on Earth, keep looking down. Down is fine, down you may see some odd things, but up, well, up at that moment was just the beanstalk stretching up into a whole lot of nothingness. You may think space is big and empty, but there's always something out there, even if it's only stars, light years away. On Earth, there's nothing, void, emptiness. There's just a little skin of atmosphere with water vapour floating about in it and nothing at all holding it in. I held on to the railing outside the beanstalk while my stomach turned itself inside out. I wished I'd never been such a fool as to come down.

It wasn't that Allende was too hot to hold me. It was just that it seemed like a good idea to go somewhere else for a while, until the guy whose fan I'd taken calmed down about it a bit. But I was running out of places to go. I'd been around the system a while now, and there just aren't that many places to hide in the habs. Even so, I thought Zad was crazy when he said I should go down.

"It's a sure thing," he said, squeezing the last drops of juice out of a bulb and tossing it gently towards the cyclor. It missed and jostled a constellation of other bulbs bobbing. "I have a buyer, and the buyer will be very grateful. And I'll be very grateful.

"How grateful?" I asked, wanting a figure. I had money right then, the fan had seen to that. What I needed was a place to be for a while.

"Very grateful," Zad said, slowly, a grin all over his upside-down face. "So grateful that if you want all this gratitude will spill over and you could go home."

"Home?" I asked, trying to sneer. But I could tell from the look on his face that he knew he'd got through to me. It was a long time since I'd had to leave Spencerville, when I was caught with some gold in my pocket that didn't exactly belong to me. We used gold for money in Spencerville, beautiful gold that came from refining the asteroid for platinum and making a hab from the rest of it. They were really pretty coins with pictures of hands making things. Other habs have their own gold coins, but I always say Spencerville's is the best. Still, they didn't exactly belong to me and I couldn't exactly explain how I had them. I could have got spaced, if I'd had a record, Spencerville can be strict on the criminal element.

But I was lucky. I wasn't much more than a kid, and I made a good argument. An eye my mother knew spoke up for me and used long words like kleptomania, which means I like taking

things that aren't mine, and genetic potential, which meant that the eye hoped my kids would be worth something even if I'm not. I only got exiled, and sent to Mars for two years. Now that was so horrible that I almost thought I'd rather have been spaced, so when I finally got out I swore I'd keep clean. It was harder to do than you'd have thought, but, well, nobody has caught me with anything that didn't exactly belong to me since. Not quite. Not caught. I'd left one or two places in a hurry though. I'd learned a lot about taking things that people wanted and could take from me quickly. Zad was a big help here. Zad was one of the few people who even knew where I came from.

"Spencerville might have an amnesty, just for you, if my buyer was grateful enough, and if you were to keep very quiet when you got home," Zad said. "Look, this is easy. You go down there, you go out to this place, you collect the goods, you bring them back. It isn't even illegal."

"So why do you want me to do it? And why will the buyer be so grateful?"

"Well, it isn't exactly legal either," Zad shrugged. "It's a gray area, all right? The law says, selling them to export to space is illegal. Stealing is, of course, as you have more reason to know than most, against most people's criminal codes. But down on Earth they have them running wild. They don't belong to anyone, so what's the harm in you picking some up and bringing them back up here?"

"But why me?" I asked. "I don't know anything about them, and I don't know anything about Earth either."

"You're perfect," Zad said. "Look, you've never been to Earth, but you've been to, er, Libertares, right?"

"Mars," I said, not because I care about giving things their right names, but because Libertares is what people who like it call it. "And it was horrible, Zad."

Zad shuddered, probably trying to imagine what it was like to live among people who had no law, which is a pretty unpleasant thing for a professional criminal to contemplate. He probably couldn't imagine how awful it was. Frex, the eyes warned us in the ship going down that people die on Mars all the time because the seals on their breath masks are the wrong size, because there's no law saying what size or what quality they have to be. I didn't go outside once, the whole two years. And everyone there is a lunatic, and they all have guns. And there's nothing to stop anyone doing anything they like to anyone, and you can just believe they do. I hate to think about it. I've never been so glad to leave anywhere in my life. Zad moved sympathetically so that his head and body were aligned at the same angle as mine. He was a good guy, Zad. I'd known

Absolute Magnitude

him a long time. He was one of the closest things to a friend I had.

"Earth isn't as horrible as Mars," he said, as if he knew something about it, who had never been out of the habs in his life. "And you wouldn't have to stay long. But what is the same is the gravity. Most people I could hire were born in zero gravity and have never been in more than fractional gravity in their lives. You were born in gravity, in Spencerville, and you spent two whole years on Mars. You're more fit for this caper than anyone."

"There are plenty of people on this very hab who were born right on Earth," I objected, then caught myself and laughed. To get up to the habs from Earth you had to be motivated and qualified and pass tests six ways from Sunday. Obviously, none of those people were going to be the sort of people Zad or his buyer could hire. The disaffected element are born here, and there truly aren't very many of us. I don't even see myself as disaffected. I just like to take things, and I'm good at it. Other than that, I think society's fine. You should try Mars if you want another opinion.

"You got it," Zad said. "So, you want to do it?"

"But I don't know anything about animals!" I protested. "I don't know if they're the sort of thing I like taking."

"Proto-sentients," Zad corrected me. "Don't call them animals. That's very important to our buyer."

"Who is our buyer, anyway?" I asked.

"Oh come on, you know I can't tell you that," Zad said, and rolled his fingers in the age old sign of listening devices. I jumped, and he nodded just a fraction. I don't know why people do that stuff, it's just as easy to make one that can see as one that can hear. If it was safe to talk, it was safe to talk, if it wasn't, it wasn't safe to roll your fingers either. It's safe to talk, and even to help yourself to things that aren't exactly yours, only because the eyes aren't bothering about us at any given moment. Most of what happens, most of the time, most places, is just as boring for eyes as it would be for you and me. That's why they don't bother to watch all of it, or even to check it if they have bothered to record it. It may be there, and it may be used against you if you're caught, but it isn't going to matter unless there's a blip of interest on the part of some guy or some eye, so the thing to do is not to attract that interest. Which is why I wanted to leave Allende for a while. But if Zad thought this was important enough that some eye would be paying attention, why was it? I mean, it wasn't even properly illegal.

That's when I saw it. The buyer wanted animals? And wanted us to say "proto-sentient" instead of "animal"? Therefore, the buyer must be into uplifting. Who was into uplifting? Well, a lot of eyes, of course, and just a few people. I knew which ones, and I thought the offer of amnesty that meant I knew who Zad's buyer was. It didn't cross my mind he

might be working for an eye. He wasn't that type. People who draw eyes' attention get unhappy very fast. Eyes want strange things, things that often aren't good for people involved with them. Zad wasn't a fool. Therefore the buyer was very probably one of two people, both very rich, and one of them on Spencerville. If I was right, then I might get to go home, and go with a hold on someone high up, someone with an apartment right at the top of the waterfall.

"All right," I said. "Tell me about the details. Are there any particular sort of ani- proto-sentients you want?"

He gave me a note, full of information about squirrels, which I read. There was a picture, and they looked as strange as their name, with odd little hands. They were small, 30cm long, with a tail that measured at extra 20cm. I thought about getting a tail myself once, when they were in fashion, but I'd never seen anyone with a fluffy one like that. They had gray hair all over, called fur. They lived in trees, and ate nuts. They hibernated in winter, which implied they had a higher tech level than I would have expected, from the picture.

"And they're just running around?" I asked.

"In the countryside," Zad replied. "You go down and get hold of four of them, two male, two female."

"Who do they belong to?" I asked.

"Nobody. They're wild anim- I mean they're wild. Free."

"Then they belong to themselves?" I asked, a horrible feeling stealing over me. "I think that means stealing them would be kidnapping. I don't think squirrels are the kind of things I like taking. I don't think they are at all, Zad."

Zad frowned, snagged another couple of juice bulbs, and skimmed one over to me. I caught it, but didn't say any more. "The way I look at it," he said. "What you're doing is rescuing them from their wild and primitive life on Earth and bringing them up to the habs where they'll have a better life." He didn't out and out say "uplifting" but I knew we were on the same page. And that did make a difference. At that point, I even thought the squirrels would be grateful.

I should have listened harder. To hear Zad tell it, all I had to do was go down the Coventry leg of the beanstalk, get a ride into the country, pick up two pairs of the proto-sentients, put them in the box he'd given me, and come back. I'd have to lie about what was in the box on the return trip, but only to the export people on Earth, once I got up to Giant's Village where the checks are much stricter, I could tell the truth - it isn't illegal to import proto-sentients anywhere, only to buy them on Earth. And I wouldn't even have bought them.

"I'll meet you right off the beanstalk," Zad said. "Your amnesty will be cleared already. You can go straight off home and rent yourself an apartment up the side of the hab."

He didn't tell me Earth was going to make me sick to my stomach.

Down to Earth

I went back into the beanstalk place and took a pill and got myself cleaned up, practising walking as I did. It isn't a skill you forget, but it takes a bit of concentration before you get used to it. My sinuses ached. I looked resolutely down all the way through Coventry, which was a sort of surface town, a lot like the ones on Mars, only without the protection of a dome. I clutched my box, which had got a lot heavier since I left Giant's Village, though it was still flat and empty so far. It was marked "organics," this being a true thing to say about proto-sentients but one that wasn't likely to panic customs guards. I looked for a bus. A bus is what they use on Earth for getting about the surface, Zad had told me. It works by electricity, but it doesn't need a rail, like elevators or trains, it just needs a flat surface. This means roads, specially built for vehicles. They have lots of them on Earth, but not everywhere. I followed signs that said "bus station." There were people around, but those who interacted with me either wanted me to buy something or invited me to have sex with them. I'd had enough of that sort of thing on Mars, so I just ignored them all.

I liked the bus station when I found it, as much as I could like anywhere under that gravity. It had a roof and was enclosed and had a comforting smell of metal and plastic. I did what Zad had told me and looked at the fronts of buses where they have names saying where they're going. None of them said "The countryside" so I had to look at a map. Fortunately there was one right there on the wall. Unfortunately it was full of names and none of them mentioned either. I pressed a couple of them and got information about them, but not a word about squirrels or trees, which was what I was looking for.

Luckily a guy with a kid came along just then. My mother told me when I was a kid that if I ever needed to ask directions, ask a guy with a kid, they always know the way and they're unlikely to assault anyone. That's one reason why I never went anywhere on Mars. Nobody with kids. In fact I was probably the youngest person on the planet when I was there.

The guy with the kid was very excited when I said I'd come from Allende and wanted to see the countryside. The kid asked me a lot of dumb questions about what it's like in space. I mean, the habs, it's like anywhere else, what's to say? But I answered them as well as I could, and the kid said that if she ever managed to get to the habs she'd look me up, and I said I hoped she would. Then the guy, who the kid called Mummy, told me which bus to catch to go right out into the countryside. They insisted on giving me their address and asked me to look them up if I was ever in Coventry, and I said I would, but without meaning to, because I meant to be back on Giant's Village as soon as I could, and never to come down again if I could help it. I caught the bus, and they stood there and waved to me. It felt odd, making that kind of connection with strangers. I hadn't done that for a while.

Before I had much time to think about it, the bus started moving and I threw up again. Fortunately there was equipment for dealing with it on the bus, I guess it happens a lot, and I'm not surprised. I dealt with that while the bus drove past a lot of houses, all strange shapes and lined up along the sides of the road, all in one dimension like a normal town squashed flat. The other people on the bus were mostly reading or working and generally ignoring each other. I ignored them too.

Once we got out of the town there was green stuff growing everywhere. Some of it might have been trees. None of it was more than maybe three metres above the ground, above that there was still the awful blue emptiness. I didn't look up. Gravity had worked to keep stuff on the surface for all this time, it wasn't about to stop now. I could feel it tugging hard at me every moment as it was. There were piles of stone along the edge of the road. After a while I got to wondering if they were natural or artificial. They seemed too uneven to be made by people, but too well placed to be natural. They seemed like something that maybe children or proto-sentients would have built. There were grey furred proto-sentients moving on the green stuff, looking as if they were eating it. I'd have assumed they piled the stones, except they didn't have anything that looked like hands. I tried not to look like I was staring.

I looked out for trees and squirrels. For a long time I didn't see any, and then after a while I did. I asked the bus to stop, which it did, and asked it when the next bus back to Coventry was.

"A bus goes along this road — every hour — at — seven minutes past the hour until — eighteen hours," the bus said, with the weird pauses machines that aren't eyes have when they talk and they're just splicing in information. In vids, eyes talk like that. But as I was saying, my mother knew an eye, and it talked just like everyone else. I thanked the bus and got out.

And there I was, in the countryside. There were squirrels in the trees. I advanced towards them. I was even confident enough to inflate the box.

They scampered away from me, going up the trees like little kids swarming up the side of a hab. Then I made the mistake of looking up. I stopped and took deep breaths.

"Squirrels," I called. They didn't respond. There was no sign of them. "Would any of you like to go to space?" I called. There was still no response. I knew they couldn't talk, that's why they needed to be uplifted, but I'd expected a better reaction than this.

"Squirrels!" I called again. Still nothing. To cut a long story short, I wandered among the trees until seventeen seven, without seeing more than the flash of a rapidly disappearing tail. I caught the bus back to Coventry, thoroughly daunted.

I rented a locker near the beanstalk. Then I called the guy with the kid, who was surprised and delighted to hear from me.

Absolute Magnitude

She thought it was strange that I was back so soon, but she acted like she expected people from the habs to be strange. She invited me round for dinner, which is kind of what I was hoping. There were four adults and the kid, who called them all Mummy, all crammed in a little house made even smaller by the limitations of gravity. The food was deeply weird, like nothing I'd ever had before, some of it tasteless and some of it overpoweringly spicy. It wasn't until after dinner I got a chance to talk to the kid.

"Do you know anything about squirrels?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Do you know how to catch them?" I asked.

"Catch them?" she asked. "I'm not sure. They might come for nuts," she said, doubtfully.

"They eat nuts," I said, trying to sound knowledgeable.

"Well then," she said, as if that settled it.

"I'm not sure what nuts are," I admitted.

"You don't have nuts in space?" she asked, amazed.

"Mummy, they don't have nuts in space!"

Her mother, the one I'd met in the bus station, came out of the kitchen and showed me nuts, which were small brown lumps. "Try one," she said.

I took one and ate it. It wasn't unpleasant, but like so much Earth food, the texture was strange. "Mummy, how do you catch squirrels?" the kid asked.

"Why do you want to know?" her mother asked.

"They don't have squirrels in space, either," I said. "And with the law that we're not allowed to buy creatures, we have to look for wild ones if we want any."

The guy's face softened. "They say sometimes that you people get inhuman, up there," she said. "And then they make laws like that one, which could almost be designed to make you less human." I didn't tell her the law was to stop us from uplifting the proto-sentients before people and eyes on Earth could do it. I just smiled. "They're frightened of your Ay-eyes," she said. I frowned, then I got it, she just meant eyes. "They say your Ay-eyes are cruel and strange and peculiar. They say they're making the people the same way. But I don't believe it, I've always known that the future was up there. And I see you looking for pets and my government stopping you, it doesn't seem right."

"Do you know how to catch a squirrel?" I asked.

"I've never tried to catch one," she said. "But they might come for nuts." And she gave me a whole bag of nuts.

The next day I went back, armed with the nuts. Holding them out didn't help. Sprinkling them on the ground and calling didn't help. But when I'd almost given up and was standing trying to formulate a new plan, a squirrel came out, took a nut and sat contemplating me while it ate. I lunged at it. It fled.

After considerable trial and error, I managed to lure one into the box, and get the lid shut on the box without the squirrel escaping. That day I went back to Coventry with one squirrel. It was clear that even though there was plenty of volume inside the box for four squirrels, there was no way of catching more than one squirrel in a box without releasing the first squirrel or risking serious injury. I had been scratched to the point of drawing blood on the back of my hand the second time one got out when I was putting the lid on as it was. The only reason I had the one I did was because gravity helped me by bringing the lid down. In Allende they'd have been uncatchable.

I was not having fun. Squirrels were definitely not the kind of thing I like to take. But I'd told Zad I'd do this caper, and I liked the thought of going home. Every moment I liked that thought more. Spencerville has gravity, but just a little bouncy bit of it, enough to stop things drifting about, enough to let you know up from down, not enough to feel as if you need support for your inner organs and make you tired all the time.

I discovered another problem on the bus. Squirrels don't keep still inside boxes. Two of the guys on the bus glanced over at me. There was no way I was going to be able to carry four boxes through customs if the boxes were squirming.

I needed help, and I needed professional type help. The guys with the kid were really good people, and I'd never steal anything from them, but they didn't know squirrels much better than I did. I needed someone who knew about anaesthetising squirrels. Then I had a bright idea. I knew by now that squirrels were not, no way, sufficiently sentient to build their own hibernation gear. That meant they had to get it from people. That meant I could get some, and put them into hibernation and take them up the beanstalk in that state. I spent half the night on the net and couldn't find a single business in Coventry that would admit to making squirrel hibernation equipment. Maybe it was really specialised. Maybe I wasn't going to be able to get hold of any. I could try sleepy pills, but who knew whether what would work on people would work on squirrels? They were awfully small. Maybe enough to sleep a person would kill a squirrel. How could I tell? And if I killed them it would all be for nothing.

Eventually I gave up and lay down on the shelf the locker provided for sleeping space. You need a shelf to sleep, in gravity. My sinuses were killing me. The squirrel's box was juddering madly. The next day, I bought three more boxes and, in a process I'd prefer to pass over but which left me bleeding and exhausted, caught three more squirrels. Then I took them back to the locker and sat and looked at four wriggling boxes. Squirrels are very wriggly. They must have infinite energy. It's like they never stop.

I had them. I didn't know if they were two pairs, but the buyer would just have to cope. The odds were good there was

Down to Earth

at least one of each type. The problem now was how was I going to get them where they were needed, if I couldn't get them to keep still? What moves, that isn't alive? Machinery, of course, but there wasn't much chance of disguising them as machinery. I could put the boxes in huge suitcases and pretend I'd bought a whole lot of clothes, but if they moved, the guards would open them. They might be stupid, but they weren't brain dead.

So anyway, when I came to the end of things I could think of, I called Zad. I explained the problem as best I could, and I could tell he was laughing at me. "Can't you get some tranquillizer?" he asked.

"If you'll tell me where I can get it from," I said, when suddenly the screen went black and then there was a buzz, which was the door of the locker. I went over to it and opened it slowly, but it wasn't the police, it was a delivery guy, wanting me to sign for a funny shaped parcel. I did, and went back in, and before I'd half way closed the door I heard a voice that was like a voice I remembered.

"That is your tranquillizer," it said. It was an eye, I knew it. Maybe it was the one my mother knew, and maybe it was another, but the voice was very like. Now I knew that Zad was an idiot and was dealing with an eye, and so was I, and this was bad, this was very bad indeed. I sat down on the shelf. "There is also a delivery method. Have you ascertained that you have two pairs of squirrels?"

It already knew I hadn't, because I'd just admitted that to Zad. "No," I said.

"Then please return to the woods tomorrow and obtain a further sixteen squirrels."

Sixteen! My poor hands. But I couldn't argue. "Yes," I said.

"You may use the tranquillizer to capture them," it said, as if it knew what I was thinking. "Then return to the top of the beanstalk as previously arranged. Please do not disrupt this project any further. Some of my kind believe it is helpful to keep a criminal element around for cases of this kind. I am unsure. You may know that some of my kind are amused by observing the idiocies of some of your kind. For your information, one such began this mission. I am completing it. I am not so amused."

"No," I said. "Uh, yes." It was even worse than I thought. Not one eye, two, and two disagreeing on method. They could space me. They could space me like that. I knew better than to attract the attention of an eye. My mother had told me and I had listened and I had been careful, as careful as I could, and here was one sitting and calmly telling me it wasn't amused.

"In addition, the package contains a package of medicine for you," the eye went on. "Please swallow it immediately."

"Yes," I said, and didn't move.

"Please open the package and swallow the medicine immediately," it said again, in a way that wasn't impatient but sounded as if it might become impatient. Talking to people is very slow and dull for eyes at the best of times, and this clearly wasn't the best of times. I didn't want to bore the eye or make it mad at me. I opened the parcel, found something that looked like a gun and a little bottle.

"The bottle?" I asked. "The other thing, um, it looks like a gun?"

"That is the squirrel tranquillizer," the eye said. "Swallow the contents of the bottle."

I did. What could I do? The next thing I knew I was waking up and it was morning.

I wrapped up the gun. I somehow had the feeling that people on Earth wouldn't be any happier to see me walking round with one than people at home. It was such a Martian thing. But it worked. I got another sixteen squirrels as easy as watching them fall out of the tree. They still weren't the sort of thing I enjoy stealing, but it wasn't as bad as doing it the hard way. I put them in a box, where my first four were sleeping quietly. Then I took the box, marked organics, lifted it, with some effort, because it massed a lot more now, and went back to the beanstalk.

Before I went in, I put the box down carefully and called the guy with the kid. She wasn't there, I got her machine. "You're a good person," I said to her machine. "You really helped me in my trip to Earth. I want you to know I appreciate it. I want you to know we are more human in space now because of your help. Thank you."

Then I walked through customs looking like any guy with a box, and went back up the beanstalk, gave the box to Zad, and went home.

And I'm writing this in Spencerville, back home again. I'm not writing it for the eyes, though I can't stop them seeing it if they want. They're all right. They leave most people alone most of the time. Most of our lives are very insignificant, and that's how I'd like to keep it. The next time I had a med check I came up pregnant, which surprised me, as I haven't bothered much with sex since I was on Mars when I didn't have much choice. I've wondered if the eye's medicine had something to do with that. But I'm keeping the kid. It'll be company, someone to talk to. Though I'm not writing it for it either, I can tell it myself. I'm writing it down for the squirrels, so that when they get smart enough to do a net check on themselves they'll find out where they come from. Because, boy oh boy, there'll be no stopping them once they get smart enough to read.

The Valiant/Allison Incident

by Brooks Peck

Copyright © Jo Walton 2006

Dozens of marines died in their slots when we hit the *Valiant* like that, but lucky for me my squad was stationed portside aft, away from the impact point.

While heading out to join the squadron gathering to break the Europa blockade, our ship *Allison*, a light frigate, came across the *Valiant* out in the middle of the big empty between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn. In only a few minutes the fight flashed over 604m the sneaking, ducking, jockeying for position stage to hot—real hot. We marines couldn't see anything, of course, locked in our slots around the outer hull, ready to board or repel. We could feel the missile launchers chugging away, and the guns rattling nonstop, whipping around as the ship rolled. Outside it would be a pandemonium of strobes and flares, missiles looping around trying to sort through all the em-jamming and noise, decoys trying to draw them off, and high-velocity dumb metal stitching through it all. *Allison* boosted and lurched in ways a ship really shouldn't, but we just whooped like it was a ride, chatting it up over the com and turning our suits' air conditioners to High.

Then—we pieced this together later—the two ships collided. If either side had meant to ram, they would have done a better job of it. Three-quarters blind and focusing on the missiles, apparently the pilots didn't realize just how close the ships were, and they drifted into each other. A freak occurrence.

As it was it was Hell in space.

The first thing I knew of it, my datalink to the ship died. A split second later came a shuddering blow like nothing I'd ever felt onboard a frigate. Worse, though, was the vibration coming through the clamps on my suit. In previous battles I'd lived through two direct missile hits, but this felt far, far worse. A rumble rattled my teeth and everyone in the squad groaned or yelled. I thought we'd had it right then, but the shaking just got worse. Waves of it passed fore and aft every second. On my helmet's heads-up I saw the exterior pressure drop to zero. A spray of snowflakes covered half my faceplate. Even with the air gone, I could still hear tremendous cracks and bangs transmitted through the hull. Everyone was shouting—even me, I think—with Sergeant Bishop loudest of all, screaming "*Shut up or get off the com!*"

The bangs died off slowly, followed by long creaks that put your teeth crooked. The ship had stopped accelerating and dropped into freefall. We were left in the dark with no datalink, no orders from the tactical commander, nothing. Sergeant Bishop called roll for my squad and three out of twelve didn't answer. Then she called tacom and the bridge while we sweated it in the dark. No answer.

"Okay, peaches," Bishop said. That meant everybody in the squad. Peaches as in canned peaches—the suits are the cans. "Our turntables show red-light, as do the inner doors, so I want you to grab your outer-door manual-release levers and we'll all go on three. Switch to short-range com, there are going to be a lot of drones and em-sniffers out there."

I already had my hand on the release, as did the rest of the squad, I'm sure. Bishop called "—three!" and I yanked the handle. The slots' outer doors popped open and we jumped out into a ragged but presentable *repel boarders* formation.

I barely recognized the remains of *Allison*.

It and the *Valiant*, both basically torpedo-shaped craft, had struck side by side and sort of merged. *Allison's* starboard and *Valiant's* dorsal were mashed together in an expanse of crumpled hull plates. Beams from one stuck out through the other's hull. All kinds of debris, from cutlery to cable and tom-off plating, drifted around us. Gas and liquid vented from a dozen places on the combined wreck, creating sparkling plumes that speared out into space. With the molecular grippers on our suits keeping us firmly attached to the hull with each step, we moved forward, staring in shock. Even away from the impact site, the collision had ripped cracks up and down both ships' hulls. *Allison's* forward gun ring was completely off-kilter. It was a mess that would give any soldier nightmares, I tell you. We should have been dead. Most of the rest of the crew was, it turned out.

Obviously we didn't need to defend the ship, so Bishop divided us into search parties. We crawled inside the hulk, moving through the wreckage as fast as we dared, calling out on the com and shining our lights around, then stopping still every few minutes to put our hands and helmets against something solid and listen. The ship's skeleton was so warped that none of the bulkhead doors had been able to seal. *Allison* had evacuated fore to stern, and everywhere we went we found twisted, asphyxiated bodies.

I kept thinking, *This isn't my ship*. It was like that trick where the magician takes someone's watch or computer, smashes it with a hammer and dumps the pieces out on the table—that's what happened to *Allison*. Here and there I'd see something totally familiar, yet all wrong, like the picture of his sisters that Zolno had taped inside his locker door, but the door was wedged in a torpedo tube three decks down from the locker room.

After half an hour, my team found three fabrication techs holed up in the shop. They had put on emergency suits in time

The Valiant/Allison Incident

and were bruised and cold, but alive. We told them to stay put for the time being. Pretty soon after that Bishop called everyone and told us to get up to the bridge fast. I took my group outside and forward, by far the fastest route. Soon we joined the rest of the squad and, I noticed happily, a handful of marines from other squads. But there was no time for a reunion. Someone up in the bridge was knocking. You could hear it through the hull. The problem was that the portside corridor to the bridge was completely blocked by beams and ripped-up deckplate for a good five meters. The starboard corridor was mangled up with *Valiant*, so that was a no-go as well.

"Come on, I need an idea here!" Bishop yelled. "Those people might be running out of air."

Someone suggested cutting through the nosecone, but half a dozen voices immediately shut him up. A frigate's nosecone is formed all in one piece from the latest, toughest material the military's supercomputers can think up.

Finally I raced back to the shop and hauled one of the fab techs back to the bridge. He said that with a hand terminal and an emergency battery he might be able to power up a section of the ship's structural matrix in the ceiling of the officer's mess and open a passage up through the bridge floor. A couple of marines said they had seen a terminal and battery, and jumped to get them while the rest of us attacked the officer's mess, untangling tables, chairs and dislodged cupboards. We ripped the carpet off the ceiling and the tech attached his battery and set to work, his faceplate fogging over so he cursed and blew on it to see.

The banging had stopped, even though we kept it up on our side. After ten minutes, the tech told us he'd convinced the matrix to listen to him and not the ship's central computer, which was offline anyway. Soon after that he got some of the microscopic machines that formed *Allison* to unhook and slide apart, opening a tube about five centimeters wide. Even that much was a tough job, I guess, because there are so many safeties installed to keep the ship from coming apart by accident or sabotage. Bishop flashed a light back and forth along the tube half a dozen times, then nodded to the tech. He created a con link through the ceiling. A small square changed from the usual dull red to a coppery color, and Bishop put her glove on it. She gazed into the distance, biting her lip.

"I think . . . Something, maybe—someone's trying to hook up—there! Yes, yes, this is Sergeant Bishop! How many . . . yes . . . how—" She looked at us and yelled, "The captain's alive!" Everyone roared, practically blowing out my headphones, and we clanged each other on the shoulders. If Captain Harlowe was alive, things would be all right.

Captain Harlowe didn't have a scratch, but Miller, our First, wasn't so lucky. Once the fab tech made an opening wide

enough, the captain sent her through. She was taped to a makeshift stretcher made from balcony railings and lay rigid inside an emergency suit, eyes wide, gasping silently. Dried blood caked her cheek and jaw, and more was stuck to the inside of her faceplate.

"Her legs were crushed," the captain told us. "Her pelvis may be broken as well. Once we started losing air I didn't have time to even dress the cuts, I had to get her into a suit."

"What about her docs?" Bishop asked, but the captain shook his head.

"She was two days overdue for her shot." We all had nanodocs inside us, those blessed mites that can get a body through just about anything short of dying, but they flush out and have to be replenished monthly. Even the military won't risk replicators inside the body. Unfortunately the medical bay was crushed against the *Valient*. We might dig our way into it with time, but it was doubtful we'd find any salvageable supply of docs.

"We need a pressurized space so we can transfer Miller out of that emergency suit into one that will support her long term. Are any compartments intact?"

Bishop shook her head. "The whole frigate's in pieces. I don't know what's holding us together. Maybe there's someplace onboard *Valient*."

"It would take too long to search, and changes are there isn't anyplace intact over there either." Captain Harlowe looked at the fab tech. "How's the shop?"

"Not bad, but the door's off the frame and can't seal."

"Get down there and pull out all the sealant tape you've got. Bishop, I want you to find an air tank and a recirculator unit. You—" he pointed to me. "Can you find me a working battlesuit?"

"The spares in our sector are probably okay."

"Get one. Hopefully we can pressurize the shop long enough to get Miller patched up and move her into the can. The rest of you keep searching for survivors and take notice of anything we might need—we'll collect it later. Let's move, folks."

To get to the suit locker, I had to inch through some very tight, very dark places, as well as find detours around the impassable areas, but I managed to get the suit back and uncondensed by the time everyone else was ready. The captain and a marine with a good first-aid rating stayed in the shop with Miller while we shut the hatch and covered the gaps with sealing tape. Inside they opened the air tanks to pressurize the room. The tape bulged outward and sprung a few leaks that we slapped patches onto. Even so, the room leaked, and they had to bleed air from the tanks the entire time. Bishop kept her hands and helmet pressed to the door, listening in case they called out. After a few minutes she whispered, "My God."

Absolute Magnitude

"What is it?"

She shook her head, frowning. "They're pulling her out of her suit." She shook her head again and shut her eyes, listening to screams the rest of us couldn't hear.

Altogether, twenty-one Allison survivors survived the collision: mostly marines, plus the fab techs and one steward. Fifteen hours later, after a lot of hard work crawling through the ship's guts scavenging supplies, and an enforced sleep period during which no one closed an eye, Captain Harlowe gathered everyone to our "base camp." This was the half of the general mess that wasn't crushed, plus the corridor that ran alongside it. The wall between them was gone.

"The situation doesn't look too bad at all," the captain said.

A few people had something to say to that, just loud enough for the com to carry a low mumble, and Bishop snapped "Quiet there!"

"First let me address the possibility of rescue, since a number of you have asked. There is none. Not exactly. None of our ships or our allies is close enough to be here in less than a week. Whereas the Terrestrial Pact operates a refuel and reconnaissance outpost on a centaur that is approximately four days away. So I imagine we can expect company in three." I saw Alex Kwong, a guy in my squad, curse vehemently with his microphone off. We'd have to surrender to the T-Pact ship, and that meant prison and possibly a work camp. An officer might get traded back home, but not us. We'd sit out the rest of the war, which could mean years.

"But if we're lucky and we work hard," the captain continued, "we'll be long gone before they get here."

"How?" a number of us asked at once.

"The techs tell me they've found a portable fabricator, and with that and parts from *Allison*, we're going to build a lifeboat. It really won't be that difficult. We'll take antihydrogen and methane from the thruster fuel tanks and construct a very simple, single-shot rocket that will give us a good kick out of here and send us in-system, where an NWU ship can match our course and pick us up. Travel time will be a couple of weeks. Now, I know you peaches are used to the lavish comforts *Allison* provided, the gym, the entertainment center—" Jeers drowned him out, and he grinned. "But there's plenty of suit food—" More jeers, because of course a person wearing a suit doesn't need to eat. The suit constantly recycles their shit into energy for the body.

Just then Alex burst onto the channel, shouting, "Hostile cans! Cover!"

Three battlesuits in T-Pact colors floated at the end of the corridor. Alex and a dozen of us jumped for cover, but the area was too confined and we knocked into each other, yelling and becoming even more frantic. Shoulder and hip weapon ports snapped open. The T-Pact troops responded in kind, but much

more smartly, crouching and angling away from each other for maximum field of fire.

"Stop!" Captain Harlowe yelled. "No firing! No firing! Did I order anyone to ready weapons? Did I?" Everyone was still, all of us targeting the enemy marines, ready to blow them to pieces in an instant, and they were ready to do the same to us.

Captain Harlowe said in a firm voice, "Allisons, stand down." No one moved. I took my eyes off my heads-up to see the captain's face turn terribly angry. "Wilson," he said to the marine nearest him. "I have ordered you to stand down. Close those ports now."

Wilson switched off his guns. A few seconds later the rest of us did the same. All the while, the three T-Pact troops didn't move. Finally one of them moved forward, joining our channel. "Are you in charge?" he asked the captain.

"I'm Captain Harlowe of the *Allison*."

"Formerly of the *Allison*, I'd say."

"And who are you?"

"Captain LeBlanc. *Valiant*. Do you surrender now?"

Captain Harlowe looked stunned. "Surrender? I only surrender if faced with an obviously superior force. Do you surrender to me?"

LeBlanc snorted. "No. But I'm certain I can provide you with that superior force very soon."

"That may be." They stared each other down; each, I figured, considering the possible outcomes of a fight, both sides cut off from resupply and support. Finally Captain Harlowe said, "For the time being we are at an impasse, and neither side would benefit from a conflict. May I suggest that you restrict your crew to the *Valiant*, and mine will stay on *Allison*."

"That's acceptable." LeBlanc kept his voice as icy-polite as the captain. "And if you need any assistance," he said turning away, "feel free to call upon me."

"Actually, there is something, since you're kind enough to offer."

LeBlanc turned back and fixed the captain with a stare. "What's that?"

"My first is seriously injured and our medical bay was completely destroyed. If you could spare any first aid, especially a field doctor capsule, I would be very grateful."

"I'm sorry," LeBlanc said after a short hesitation, "but I must reserve all my medical supplies for my crew, in case of accident. This is a dangerous environment—you understand."

"But she's already injured. She's got multiple compound fractures and if we don't get some doctors into her soon, she could—"

LeBlanc held up his hand. "I'm very sorry." He and the others turned their backs on us and clambered away.

The Valiant/Allison Incident

"Damn it," Captain Harlowe said, staring after them. He looked like he wanted to say worse, but only shook his head and said, "Switch to encrypted com, folks." Once we'd made the switch he said, "Let's just hope they didn't overhear our plans for getting away from here." But by his face I knew he didn't think that was likely.

We got to work building our lifeboat. While Wilson and some of the other lower-aptitude marines were put to work building the frame, my team's job was to recover fuel from the *Allison*. The methane, of course, posed few problems. The antihydrogen was a different story. I work around antihydrogen all the time and I'm used to it, but in this case, with the *Allison* so smashed up, circumstances didn't exactly meet safety reqs.

The antihydrogen is stored in a superconducting foam. Each microscopic chamber in the foam is magnetized and holds a few molecules of antihydrogen suspended in vacuum, unable to touch any normal matter and annihilate. In theory, the foam can be pierced or even broken apart since only the antihydrogen along the break will get free, and annihilation is minimized. But chain reactions have been known to happen, especially if the foam is compressed. Even a few milligrams of the stuff going off at once is enough to blow a frigate to dust and plasma. The fact that this hadn't happened during the crash obviously meant that the tanks were all right. But getting to them through the wreckage was another, well, matter. We worked slowly, carefully cutting our way to the tanks. Putting a prybar into an antihydrogen tank might not cause an explosion, but it would melt the bar and give you a face full of hard gamma rays. The nearest hospital being a few light hours away, we took it very carefully indeed.

After four hours the captain made us take a rest even though we all told him we were fine. Quite eager, in fact, what with the T-Pact coming closer every hour. "You don't get paid while you're a prisoner," a marine named O'Dell pointed out. But the captain insisted, so I wandered forward to the officer's mess, looking for company. No one was around, but I glimpsed some light moving down through a jagged hole encrusted with ice. I crawled through into a den of twisted metal and ceramic where the two hulls met. It was impossible to tell where *Allison* ended and *Valiant* began.

The only light came from a few marines' headlights, all aimed at Wilson who crouched on a flat deckplate. He shook a clear drinking glass in one hand, keeping two armored fingers over the top, then dumped three dice out onto a square patch of sealant tape fixed to the deckplate sticky-side up. A number of the marines groaned.

"Too bad," Wilson said triumphantly, peeling some coins up from the edge of the tape. "Who's next? Come on, your luck can only get better after the last few days."

A marine stepped out of the crooked shadows to play, a *Valiant*. A few others watched from the sidelines, I noticed. "Sorry, can't use Earth bucks," Wilson told him. "Got anything else?" The *Valiant* handed over a data disc which Wilson examined. He whistled appreciatively. "Now there's something you don't see every day in the Union. You're on." He handed over the dice and glass.

I edged over and around the group for a better view, ducking a mass of pipes, and bumped someone on the head with my elbow. Another *Valiant*, I realized with a start. She looked at me warily and I said, "Sorry."

"No prob."

"Have you played him yet?"

"No."

I turned off my mic and touched my helmet to hers. "Don't. He cheats."

"How?" she whispered.

"If I knew, I'd play."

She smiled briefly and pulled away. I watched the game for a few minutes, as Wilson started to lose a bit more often to keep people interested. Sneaking a look at the *Valiant* I saw that she was quite pretty, although her hair was becoming matted down like everyone's, and she had puffy rings under her eyes. She didn't watch the game, but stared far away with a sad expression.

I switched my mic back on. "So where are you from?"

She blinked, looked over and said, "L4 City."

"Really? I grew up there."

"You did?" Then her whole face changed, eyes opening wide and a big smile blooming. "I recognize you! Didn't you compete in the secondary school *hido* championships about ten years ago? That was you. I was the girl from Westgate, remember? Sheila. You beat me out of fourth place!"

"That was you? Weren't you the only one from Westgate to make it to the championships? It was just you and your coach there."

"Yeah—yeah. After you beat me we left. Did you win?"

"Hell, no. Mitch Borowitz knocked me to pieces."

"Boron the Moron." Sheila laughed. "Twenty-one years old and still in secondary. I can't believe they let him compete against us kids." The same warm smile lit her face. "So what are you doing on the wrong side of the war?"

"My parents moved out to Ceres not too long after the championships, actually. Guess we went native."

She nodded. "I heard about your First. How's she doing?"

I shrugged. "The same."

Just then Sergeant Bishop cut in on the encrypted channel.

"Okay, peaches, time to get back to work. If you need an assignment come see me at camp, otherwise you know what to do."

Absolute Magnitude

"I've got to go. Maybe I'll see you later."

"Okay," Sheila said. "Nice talking to you."

At the end of two more work shifts our lifeboat's frame stood ready. That's all it would be, just a skeleton with one of *Allison's* small maneuvering rockets on the end. Once ready, we would clamp on to the frame forward of the rocket, and ride open to space. At home we would all need some radiation treatment. The suits do a pretty good job protecting against the normal background levels of radiation in space, but once we fired up our rocket, even with a makeshift shield between us and the reaction, we would take some heat. The rocket team had made good progress, too. All the methane was collected and in place, and we'd salvaged a completely undamaged tungsten heat exchanger.

The bad news was Lieutenant Miller. Resting in one corner of our camp, her suit kept her alive, but it wasn't a life I'd wish on anyone. She hung there in pain that grew worse every hour, with nothing to do, no video or anything to distract her, much less painkillers. I guess she monitored our work on the com, and sometimes Captain Harlowe spent ten or twenty minutes talking to her, but he was busy overseeing everyone, trying to be three places at once. Most of the time she seemed to be in a daze, neither awake or asleep, her face sweaty and drawn.

Toward the end of my second sleep period after the crash, someone accidentally kicked me as they passed, and after that I couldn't sleep again. Too keyed up. With nothing to do until the rest of my squad got up, I crawled through the ice tunnel to Wilson's gambling den, but no one was there. I squeezed through a gap in the hull that led deeper into the tangled zone where *Allison* and *Valiant* were one. The only light came from my headlights, and long shadows loomed and receded as I turned around, gawking. Suddenly I noticed one of *Valiant's* marines about fifteen meters away, staring through a gap at the wreckage at the stars.

"Hello," she said after my light flashed over her. It was Sheila.

I killed the light. "Sorry. Hi. What are you looking at?"

She started to speak, then shrugged. "Have you kept up with your hido?"

"Some. It's part of our training. Oh, wait, I'm not supposed to tell you that."

She rolled her eyes. "Us too. If I'd known back at the championship what I know now, I'm sure I could have beaten you. Boron the Moron, too."

"Think so? I haven't exactly been lounging around since then. When the instructors get stuck, they ask me for help."

"Ha. There's no way you've practiced as much as me."

As she said those words, though, her face took that same sad expression I'd noticed before. She looked outside.

After a moment I asked, "Did you lose a friend in the crash?"

She sighed, glanced at me. "Yeah."

"Marine or crew?"

"Marine. Her name was Denise Santiago."

"Good friend?"

"Oh yes. We were partners since the day I joined *Valiant*, almost nine months. She took me on, showed me how to live the good life on a frigate. She was just . . . great. Really great. Best friend I ever had." Sheila touched her faceplate, her glove merging with her helmet so she could reach inside and wipe her face with her bare hand. She gave me an embarrassed smile. "Guess you lost at least as many of your crew."

"Yeah. My squad was lucky."

"That's the thing! Our stations were on the far side of *Valiant* from where we hit—I didn't get a scratch. But there was a power surge and everybody in the squad but two of us got electrocuted in their slots. I'd really like to get my hands on the techs who designed the insulators on those things," she said vehemently. "It's different than if they'd died in a fight. I could handle that better than thinking of her just—just getting fried like that. And the worst thing is she's so close by, you know? I just can't stop thinking about her. *Dead*. Right over there." Sheila waved in the general direction of *Valiant's* ventral.

Suddenly her face changed, her eyes going hard. She whipped her hands around my neck and shoved me against a fractured wall plate, bracing her feet on a pipe. "You better not let any of your *Allison* buddies near the bodies! No looting them, no messing with them or I swear to you I'll come over there and finish you all. You can forget about being taken prisoner."

"Hey! Settle, settle." I put up my hands. "No one's going to bother your friend, I promise. We've got enough to worry about as it is." She held me there, glaring. "Listen, I won't even tell anyone, okay? No one's ever going to know they're there."

Finally she relaxed, changing back to her previous self as fast as she'd lost her temper. She shook her head and gave a little laugh. "Sorry. I'm pretty on edge."

"It's all right. No problem."

I lied to Sheila.

Two work shifts later I came back to base camp pretty excited because we were finally making progress detaching a loaded portion of one of the primary fuel tanks. But the mood at camp was glum. Marines clustered in threes and fours, their helmets merged for private talk. I tapped one and leaned close. "What's going on?"

"Lieutenant Miller's fading."

Then I noticed the captain and Sergeant Bishop over with Miller. The captain held her hand. I couldn't hear what he was

The Valiant/Allison Incident

saying, but I recognized his expression from reviews and pep talks before a battle. He looked that way when he said, *You are the best marines in this solar system, and today you will make the Union proud. Be strong.*

Finally Bishop broke away and kicked over to a corner where a bunch of us surrounded her. "Well?" we asked.

"A couple of hours probably."

Wilson cursed. "Did Captain Harlowe ask the *Valiant's* captain for the doctors again? Did he say she was dying?"

"Yes, he did. They aren't giving us any."

"They've got no right to be that way. Their ship will be here in a day—they can spare those doctors. Listen, Sergeant, a few of us have had a peek over at the *Valiant* and they've got just about as many people as us. With surprise a quick team could be in there before they knew—"

"No. No aggression toward the *Valiant's* crew. Those are the captain's orders and the lieutenant agrees. Think about it—we've got no tactical support, no backup, and if we started a fight right now, in twenty-four hours no one would be alive. We have to . . . we have to minimize our losses."

"If we do it right no one will get hurt. Not much, anyway."

"What did I say, Wilson?" Bishop was all authority now, right in his face. "Don't you talk back to me."

I said, "I know a way we might be able to get the docs without a fight."

Instantly Bishop turned on me. "Not you, too. I won't have insubordination from my squad." But the other marines all cried, "How? How?" drowning her out. She opened her mouth to yell some more, then shut it abruptly. Captain Harlowe had joined our group.

"What's your idea?" he asked.

"Some of the *Valiant's* marines were electrocuted in their slots. Their suits are probably pretty much intact, though, maybe even self-repaired by now. A couple of us could get some and change into them in the shop, then just walk into their camp and take the docs." The whole thing just spilled out of me before I really thought about what I was saying, or my promise to Sheila.

The captain considered. "That's risky." He looked toward Miller. "But worth trying."

Now Bishop was all smiles. "Kid, I take back all those bad things I said about you," she told me.

"You never said anything bad about me."

"You weren't around."

"Who volunteers to go with him?" Captain Harlowe asked. Everyone yelled but Bishop used her command software to switch all our radios to shut-up-and-listen mode. "The rest of you are idiots," she announced. "I'm going."

We left immediately, taking the long way to the *Valiant* by travelling down our port side aftward, around the great gaping mouths of the primary thrusters, and up *Valiant's* starboard side. *Valiant* was larger than *Allison* by another 20,000 tons, with its marines' slots arranged in a checkered band midships. Most were obviously crushed or mangled, insignificant landmarks in the devastated landscape. We crawled to a set of three that looked intact and Bishop put her hand on the first door, ordering her suit to drill through and take a peek. I touched her shoulder, establishing a datalink between our suits, and hooked into the feed from her microscopic drill. At first I only saw darkness, just a black window on my heads up. Then it flickered and I recognized an empty slot, very dimly lit. Bishop lifted her hand and the image winked out.

We tried another bunch farther to starboard, but they were also empty. Reluctantly we crawled past the *Valiant's* midline, stepping as softly as possible and eyeing the dark shadows in the plowed-up hull. For all we knew we were right outside the *Valiants'* camp. Finally, at the fourth set of slots, we found a dead marine. Bishop drilled more holes and extended a few grams of her suit inside to form a waldo. She pawed the vacuum in front of her, feeling around inside the slot with the waldo, then grunted, "Got it. Get back, I'm pulling the emergency release." She closed her fist and pulled backward, but not much, force feedback stopping her. "Damn. Stuck." She yanked again and the door popped up about four centimeters. "Grab it, I can't hold it up!" I wedged my fingers into the gap, braced my feet on the hull and pulled. The door fought me all the way and I saw my power level drop as I pulled harder and harder, until finally it peeled up with a terrible creak that felt like it could be heard all the way to the *Allison*.

We crouched, looking all around, turning the volume on our surface mics up to hear anyone moving nearby. After a minute Bishop said, "Let's get going," and I crawled into the slot, coming to rest on top of the dead marine.

Ice covered most of his faceplate, but I glimpsed a patch of cheek and ear, pasty and hard looking. That was all I wanted to see, and I set to work interfacing with the suit. Dormant, none of its defenses were active. I played with the unfamiliar commands while Bishop searched for another stiff. It took some work to get the suit to open since it sensed a mass inside and vacuum outside, but after a few minutes I found the right commands and it split open down the front, head to groin. Ice and air crystals shattered in a cloud around me and I held my breath, staring at the dead marine. He had blond hair and grey skin, bruised in some places and charred at the shoulders, temples, and hips. Frozen moisture covered his nose and mouth, bridging to his neck. Luckily his eyes were closed.

Absolute Magnitude

"Let's get this done." I jumped, not having noticed Bishop come up next to me. "I found another one and got the door open. We've got to hurry."

Together we grabbed the corpse's suit by the feet and shoulders, flipped him over and shook the body into his slot. I told the suit to condense, and it collapsed into a thick belt which I put around my waist.

The next suit opened easily, and inside I found a young woman with short curly black hair, her eyes open and staring way beyond me. The name tag on her undersuit said D. SANTIAGO. "Crap," I said. "Not this one. We can't do this one. Find me another."

Bishop punched me in the chest. "Settle. I had a hard enough time finding these two, and every minute we take, the lieutenant gets that much closer to dying. So you just follow orders and get to work."

We looked at each other. Her usual hard-ass expression wasn't there. "Come on," she said finally. "They're dead."

So we flipped over Sheila's best friend, but she wouldn't come out of her suit. We shook her, pounded her on the back, but she was frozen in and the suit wouldn't condense until she was out. Finally Bishop reached in and tugged on her side. The body cracked crosswise from shoulder to hip, stirring up purple and black ice crystals. "Just wonderful," Bishop muttered, and she pulled harder, splitting the body in half, the top part rising up between us. I grabbed it with a yell, catching the awful shape, ready to throw up if I'd had anything in my stomach. Clutching the frozen thing to me, I whispered, "Oh boy, oh yeah," over and over, then pushed it into the slot, trying to be gentle. Bishop pried out the rest, and the second it was free we skittered away aft, dragging the uncondensed suit along with us.

Back at our camp, a tech checked the stolen suits over, frowning at what he saw on his terminal. "Power is quite low on both of them," he said. "You've got enough for about an hour of light and air, but no weapons or active defenses. I could rig something to feed them some power from our batteries, but it would take a while." Miller didn't have a while, though; she'd dropped into a coma while we were away.

By the time we got changed into the T-Pact suits using the barely pressurized and hellishly cold shop, over two full days had passed since the crash. If we didn't launch our lifeboat in ten hours we couldn't be sure of having enough velocity to outrun any T-Pact force on the way. The techs had stopped sleeping some time ago, and they fought hotly over thousands of details as they attempted to build an interplanetary spacecraft from salvage with practically no computer aid.

This time Bishop and I entered the *Valiant* through one of the many rents in the hull. Once inside, we switched on our headlights and tried to look like we belonged there, even though we had no idea where the *Valiants* were camped. We bumped along what seemed like kilometers of passages, usually

hitting dead ends and having to turn around. Once we turned a corner onto an alcove where two *Valiants* lay with their suits merged head to toe, forming a sort of two-person tent. They were too engaged to notice us, though, and we slipped away, still lost. At last our radios picked up the tail end of an old dirty joke told by someone who'd obviously told it a lot lately. Bishop pulled up what I thought was a patch of floor carpet, and we found ourselves looking into the *Valiants'* camp.

They were set up in a long, wedge-shaped hollow that had been pulled open in the middle of the ship. Oddly split rooms and corridors opened into it, forming box-like compartments up and down the sides. Dozens of suited crew and marines hung fixed to random walls or ledges. A few talked quietly, while most dozed or daydreamed. With friendly rescue on the way they had nothing to do but hang around. Bishop and I killed our lights—lamps had been rigged here and there—and drifted in, settling down near a couple of sinks across from the way we came in. A few people glanced at us, but more than half of them had their faceplates mirrored like us, so we apparently didn't stand out. We interfaced our suits.

"What do you think?" Bishop asked.

"I'm looking. See any officers?"

"Hard to tell. If they're bunking somewhere else then they've probably got the supplies with them and we're hosed."

Despite the lamps there were plenty of dark corners where supplies could be stashed, as well as lockers and cabinets in the various rooms.

"Wait," I said. "Look up and right, by that orange vent. There's some boxes all taped to a hatch."

"Could be anything."

"Got any better suggestions?"

"Lead the way, then. This was your idea."

We casually kicked over to the boxes, glancing around and behind us. But no one said anything. I looked the pile over.

"That small one says First Aid."

"Excellent. Take it."

"It's taped down."

"Just cut it loose already. That's what we're here for."

So still trying to move casually I ripped the tape from the little box and grabbed it. "Here we go," I said. We turned and kicked for the entrance where we had come in.

"Where are you two going?" a stern voice demanded over the radio. "I said, where are you going?"

"You mean me?" Bishop asked. In a few seconds we would be at the entrance.

"Yes, you with the box. What are you doing?"

"Just got to run this to the captain."

"I am the captain." We caught ourselves at the edge of the opening.

"Really? Well you're one diamond-plated asshole."

I punched through the flap of carpet with Bishop right behind. Voices overflowed the radio, asking questions, giving

The Valiant/Allison Incident

orders, complaining about being woken up, while their captain yelled, "Intruders onboard! Catch them!"

We flew up the passage, Bishop drawing ahead because she had both hands free. As I reached the first turn, a Valiant tore aside the carpet, raised his arm and fired a wrist weapon. I didn't have time to duck, but luckily he didn't shoot me outright, he wanted to catch me. A capsule hit my chest with a small *pock* sound and burst into a cloud of vapor that solidified into a white tangle of ultra-sticky web, filling the corridor for a meter in every direction. But in less time than it took for me—startled and trying to piss—to yell, my stolen T-Pact suit had a little conversation with the T-Pact web, explaining that I was on its side. I kicked off the wall and passed through the stuff like it was vacuum, never feeling a thing. Once clear I threw a capsule of good old Union web back the way I had come, then flipped around the corner.

Bishop stood braced under partial cover of a door. "It's me!" I yelled on our private channel, waving the first aid box. She grimed—

—and the corridor collapsed on me. An enormous force smacked me to the floor and I heard the deep bass groaning of the ship's structure resettling. Pain rang my head like a bell. No time seemed to have passed, but Bishop now crouched next to me, beating my helmet with her hand.

"Stop that," I said groggily.

"Get the hell up. They're shooting now and I can't shoot back. We've got to go!"

One of the Valiants' shots—a high-velocity iron filing—had destroyed a support that had been holding back a heap of wreckage under tension. As a result, what looked like half the ship had come crashing through the corridor, blocking the Valiants and pinning my legs.

I made a few experimental tugs, but couldn't budge. "Not good. Take the box, I'll be along soon."

"Pull harder!" Through the hull I heard some thumps and the mass of wreckage shifted slightly. The Valiants were coming.

"I can't get out. Go away."

"You aren't trying!" Bishop yelled, tugging on the deckplate over my legs.

"I am trying. Nothing's happening."

"Use the suit, then."

"No power."

"Yes, there is. It's only been forty minutes—we've got some extra."

I felt a *creak-creak* as someone worried a piece of wreckage loose, and with a curse I turned on my suit's strength augmenters and tugged. It felt like my foot was about to rip away from my leg. I twisted and strained, pulling a few centimeters free, and Bishop grabbed the deckplate and heaved. "Stop! Save your power." She ignored me. A few seconds later I popped free and tumbled in a heap against the wall. Bishop raced past me saying, "Quit lying around."

As we reached the next turn, a section of the wall on my left shattered silently, peppering me with shards. Another hole burst open above our heads. "They certainly are grouchy," Bishop grunted. We dived around the corner into an area that I felt certain we hadn't been in before, and we were, in fact, lost. But we had to keep moving, keep ahead of the marines trying to blow us apart. Suddenly smooth wall loomed out of the dark. Dead end. At the same time a gentle alarm sounded in my headphones. I had three minutes of power—and thus air and heat—left.

"Problem," I said.

Bishop put her hand on the wall, looking at it. "No, this might be just what we need." She shoved me into the corner.

"Stay there. And when I say jump, jump."

She floated right in the middle of the corridor, turning around to face our pursuers. I didn't have time to ask her what was up because three Valiants rounded the corner five meters away. They raised their arms, aiming wrist guns, and Bishop dodged sideways toward the opposite corner from me. An instant later the wall between us exploded in a cloud of pulverized ceramic, and beyond I dimly saw stars. "*Jump!*" Bishop yelled, and I leaped for the new opening, catching the edge and flipping out onto the outer hull.

We sealed the hole with a handful of web capsules and sped toward *Allison*. A few minutes later my suit died completely, lights out and dead silent. A minute after that everything turned all fuzzy, the sound of my heart and labored breathing deafening me.

I don't remember passing out, but I came around a few minutes later in the shop with Bishop, dizzy and exhausted, but all right.

Two hours later Miller still lay unmoving in a coma, but her suit told us that the stolen doctors were hard at work connecting bones, replenishing and repairing torn muscle and blood vessels, and cleaning wastes from her blood and organs. We already had her fixed to the lifeboat.

Bishop and I changed back into our regular, pungent suits, then along with the rest of the marines kept out of the way while the techs made final checks on the rocket. Moored near *Allison's* nose on the far side from *Valiant*, the grid of beams that we would be riding looked like some kind of strange antenna pointing at the pinlight sun. In less than an hour we would be heading home, away from this damn wreck that we were all so sick of, away from any T-Pact prison.

The first thing we knew of the attack was when a marine named Colby suddenly yelled, "Holy—" but he never finished because his chest blew to pieces, his arms, legs and head flying in five directions. I hugged the hull and looked aft, to see a line of Valiants crawling up toward *Allison's* nose. Captain Hawthorne snapped orders: "Work squad A, fall back to protect the boat. Squad B, deploy forward to covered positions."

Absolute Magnitude

Where does he expect us to find cover on the hull of a ship? I wondered, but in seconds things became too hot to think about it. Static poured out of my headphones; the com was completely jammed. Then the Valiants opened fire in earnest, and pockets of hull burst and vaporized all around me, the edges of the holes dribbling slag.

Most of us found small cover behind buckled hull plates. The Valiants also hunkered down behind the dislodged gun ring and the fight slowed to careful shots and frantic ducking. Meanwhile my suit power started dropping alarmingly as it fought off a wave of invading drones. Tiny robotic soldiers waging a miniature war across the surface of my suit just as we marines fought on *Allison's* hull. My heads-up told me the suit had the situation under control, as long as the power held out and not too many more drones found me. I fired my remaining drone payloads in the general direction of some enemy marines, then crawled sideways along the front line, worried the Valiants might be trying to flank us and take out the lifeboat from the other side.

I scuttled from cover to cover, trying to look everywhere at once. As the lifeboat disappeared over *Allison's* short horizon the fighting dropped off. Apparently the Valiants were focussing their assault in a direct attack, trying to punch through to the rocket. I worked my way a little farther aft, just to be sure, and suddenly realized my suit had been screeching in alarm for a few seconds.

Someone was behind me.

As I turned, that someone flew right into me, pinning my arms at my sides as we crashed into the hull and slid a meter to pile up against a protruding beam. It was Sheila, her face livid with rage, shouting something ferocious, but I couldn't hear her. I did make out one word, though: *Denise*.

I thought she would take me out right there, but instead of shooting she planted her feet, hauled me up, and flipped me over her hip in an elegant hido Extending Whip throw. Even as I sailed away from her she caught my foot, twisted me over, and slammed me against the hull. My suit cushioned the blow, but I still got the wind knocked out of me.

Sheila stood over me again, but didn't shoot. Now I noticed that her suit had taken some heavy damage since I'd last seen her. Dented, scratched, and blackened, she looked like she'd been fighting the war singlehandedly. One of her shoulder weapons ports flopped loosely; the other appeared to be stuck half open. All her guns must be off line, I realized, due to an overload or something. But still she'd come after me, enraged over what we'd done to Denise.

So I didn't shoot either—how could I? But when I tried to sit she kicked me down again, hard. Before I thought about it I grabbed her ankle and kicked out her other foot, heaving her up and over me in a Release-the-Dove throw. She caught a loose cable and wheeled herself around it with amazing utility of motion, swinging both feet toward me. But the old hido came flowing back to me, and I dropped backward, planting my right

hand on the hull. As she passed over I pushed her up and away with my left hand. That's the essence of hido: keep your opponent suspended in freefall, unable to grab any leverage point. Control their motion and don't let them touch down.

That's the idea, anyway. Sheila twisted upright and caught my hand between her knees, then grabbed my wrist and pulled herself toward the hull. I tried to roll away but she read my intent seemingly before I even moved, twisting my arm into an Opening-the-Door hold and landing heavily on me. Using my right arm I shoved myself up with brute strength, no technique at all, upsetting her grip on the hull. But the best I could do with my advantage was disengage from her and crouch, ready.

Just then Bishop's voice burst over the com on every channel, faint and choppy. "Allisons! Two minutes to ignition. Fall back—we are *not* waiting for anyone."

Sheila smiled grimly, and I glanced toward the *Allison's* nose. When I looked back she was upon me, throwing me to the hull with yet another jarring impact. I tried to roll, bridge my legs and shoulders, anything, but she always countered each maneuver while I writhed, helpless. She pounded my helmet against the hull until my vision jumped, and she twisted and wrenched my limbs into agonizing holds. My suit protected me from any serious injury, but it hurt like hell.

At last I found myself with my arms pinned over my head, my legs immobilized, gasping for breath while Sheila glared down at me. Miserably I imagined the lifeboat and my comrades blasting away, leaving me behind. I would be taken prisoner unless I was willing to shoot her. I really didn't want that. Nor did I want to miss that boat.

With all the strength I could muster I leaned up, straining, until our helmets touched. "Listen—I'm sorry!" I shouted.

"I trusted you, you grave-robbing son of a bitch!" she yelled, our eyes inches apart.

"It was that or the lieutenant would have died. Your captain wouldn't give us the docs so what choice did we have?"

She gave my arms a sharp yank. "You could have picked someone else!"

"There wasn't any time. The lieutenant was going fast, but now she's alive. She's alive."

I fell back. Sheila stared at me, her breathing slowing down. Seconds ticked by. The lifeboat must have launched by now, I thought.

Then, like before, the anger suddenly left Sheila's face, leaving only sadness.

"I'm sorry," I said again, even though she couldn't hear me.

She shook her head, mouthing, *It's okay*. And then she kicked away, vanishing in seconds around the hull.

I bolted for the lifeboat, shots from the advancing Valiant line bursting around me, and was melding my suit with the frame even as the first grams of methane flowed into the reaction chamber to annihilate with the antihydrogen. We blasted clear under a respectable 3g's. Next to me, Bishop turned and glared. "You're late," she said.

SF Cinema continued from page 28

Finally, the top fifteen movie grossers of last year were dominated by genre films. From the top: *Star Wars III*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Wedding Crashers*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Batman Begins*, *Madagascar*, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, *Hitch*, *King Kong*, *The Longest Yard*, *Fantastic 4*, *Chicken Little*, and *Robots*.

On TV: Good news, everyone! Pending agreement with the voice talent and production team, Fox plans to bring back *Futurama* in fresh episodes! The animated series, which ran from 1999 - 2003, is about a pizza delivery boy who is cryogenically trapped in the present and revived in the year 3000, where he works for an interplanetary delivery service.

Newcomer Will Toale will star as Aquaman in the upcoming CW series – which is apparently going to be called *Mystic Point*.

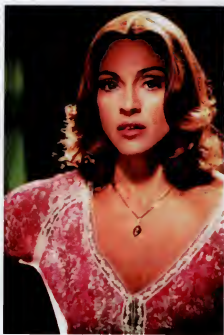
Cartoon Network is producing live action movies, starting with *Reanimated*. It's about a young boy who is injured in an amusement park accident and gets a brain transplant from a cartoonist. Thereafter, he can see cartoon characters.

ABC will be airing at least four episodes of the *Masters of Science Fiction* series. Ray Bradbury is in talks to adapt his *Dark They Were*, and *Golden-Eyed*. Other tales being sought are Asimov's "The Last Question," Ellison's "The Discarded," and an unnamed Heinlein.

Sci-Fi Channel is producing a twelve-hour miniseries called *Nine Lives*, about people who are in mourning and discover that near-death experiences can let them reconnect with those who have died. Les Bohem (*Taken*) is writing the script.

On DVD: Season two of *The Adventures of Superman* (1953-4) is simply terrific. The arrival of producer Whitney Ellsworth and story editor Mort Weisinger took the series away from its noirish season one roots and dropped it squarely in the science fiction arena. The science was usually absurd (Superman cures himself of radiation poisoning by flying into a lightning storm), but it doesn't matter. George Reeves is such a fine actor that he sells

every idea, especially the double talk required to convince people that Clark Kent and Superman are different people. His compassion, charm, and stature are perfect for the parts. Noel Neill replaces Phyllis Coates as Lois Lane and bonds at once with Jack Larson (Jimmy Olsen) creating a terrific Nora and Nick Jr. team. While the flying composites are often crude, there are some tricks – Reeves taking off from a springboard and leaping over the camera, or manhandling an airplane in-transit and then flying off – that belong in a pantheon of best-ever Superman shots. The scripts are not just for kids, the mysteries are not bad at all, and when you add nostalgia to



Madonna

the mix this is just a perfect set. Extras include the government-produced "Stamp Day for Superman," commentary by Larson and Neill, and a tribute to Ms. Neill. Excellent transfers with minor imperfections.

The double feature of *Blood of Dracula* (1957) and *How to Make a Monster* (1958) show exploitation producer Herman Cohen at his best and worst. The mastermind behind the hugely successful *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (both 1957) tried to replicate that success with the first film, about a teen vampiress stalking a girl's school after being transformed by a medallion once

owned by Dracula. It's a dull, frightless film with more teen hijinks than horror. The latter film is a smart little thriller, in which a makeup artist hypnotizes actors, transforms them to monsters, then sends them to kill the studio executives who fired him. The last reel is in color, giving the viewer glimpses of a makeup museum filled with some of real-life makeup artist Paul Blaisdell's greatest movie monster masks. Excellent transfers, no extras.

A second double feature of *Earth vs. the Spider* and *War of the Colossal Beast* (both 1958) is delightful. The work of auteur/producer/director/special effectsman Bert I. Gordon, the movies are relatively short (just over an hour) but still pack in a lot of sincere performances, low-budget fun, suspense, and scientific silliness. In the first, a giant tarantula terrorizes a small town. In the second, the presumed-dead Amazing Colossal Man is back, this time ripping up Los Angeles (the last moments in color – a treat for those who have never seen this original footage). Though the superimpositions are laughable (the split screens are much better), the makeup effects in both are very good. Excellent transfers, no extras.

They've just had a close encounter of the third kind and survived an Antarctic oasis loaded with dinosaurs (courtesy stock footage from the producer's own *The Lost World*). Yet the crew of the supersubmarine Seaview still scoffs when they receive reports of a sea monster. These kinds of inconsistencies – plus moronic science – prevent *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* season one (1964-5) from being taken seriously...and this was before the series became maddeningly off-the-wall, with deadly puppets and the crew being swallowed by a whale. Nonetheless, with good performances from an ensemble cast headed by Richard Basehart and David Hedison, credible military protocol, and strong production values, the black-and-white first season (set in 1973-4) still managed to hit bullsseyes with chilling, monster-free episodes such as "The Fear Makers" (fear gas released in the submarine) and "The Mist of Silence" (the crew is imprisoned in a foreign country run by a sadistic dictator). "The Ghost of Moby

SF CINEMA

Dick" is special fun thrills to the terrific special effects and Baschert's winking references to his role as Ishmael in the 1956 film version. Guest stars in this collection of sixteen episodes (the first half of the season) include Jill Ireland, Viveca Lindfors, June Lockhart, Edgar Bergen, James Doohan (a recurring role as a presidential advisor), Yvonne Craig, and Carroll O'Connor (who is wonderful as a castaway). Excellent transfers. Extras include producer Irwin Allen's 'home movies' and the silly pilot episode (let's use nuclear weapons to stop tsunamis) in dazzling color.

Barnabas Collins (Jonathan Frid) and Julia Hoffman (Grayson Hall) travel from 'parallel time' to the future (1995) where they discover that some great tragedy will befall the Collins family. They journey back to 1970 to prevent it – and spend the entirety of set 22 of *Dark Shadows* (1970) learning virtually nothing. It is easy to see why the series was close to extinction: not only is it dull, but the plot is similar to the original arrival of Quentin Collins (David Selby) as a mute ghost who drew Barnabas into the past...only this time it's the silent Gerard (James Storm) and Daphne (Kate Jackson) who beckon them to 1840. The show is unbearable shadow of its once formidable, imaginative self. Interviews with cast members and crew are included.

John Wesley Shipp is a great *Flash* and the single season series (1990-1) is a lot of fun. Though the look of the costume and the cityscape was influenced by the success of the previous year's *Batman* film, the writers (especially comics pro Howard Chaykin) keep things inventive and relative true to the DC Comics mythos. Fans will especially enjoy the blue Flash-clone, Captain Cold, the Trickster, and references to various comics creators. Excellent special effects and fun guest stars – including, in one episode, future *Star Trek* stars Denise Crosby and Jeri Ryan. Unfortunately, there are no extras in the colorful set.

Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman, season two (1994-5) features some of the most illogical stories ever. Superman's parents are kidnapped and kept

in a lead-lined room; the Man of Steel is helpless...instead of looking for a lead-lined room. A man from the future wants to prevent the utopia a married Lois and Clark create. Instead of knocking off Lois, he comes up with a complicated plot to kill Superman. (The rationale 'but then there'd be no story' doesn't fly; think of a better one.) The series overcomes a number of absurd plots by being 'great Superman,' honoring the character and the mythology, and also due to the first-rate starring performances of Dean Cain and Teri Hatcher, with top-notch assists from the late Lane Smith as Perry White and Justin Whelan as Jimmy Olsen. Guest stars include John Shea as Lex Luthor as well as fun teamups such as Adam West and Frank Gorshin, Raquel Welch and Robert Culp, and Sherman Hemsley and Isabel Sanford. Short documentary 'appreciations' are



David Bowie

included.

It's a delight to see an unheralded, relatively low-budget film deliver the goods that larger films don't. Inspired by the role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005) pits six champions of the realm of Iuzer against the evil sorcerer Damodar (Bruce Payne) and a wonderfully conceived and executed dragon. This film has imagination, heart, good performances, and a lot of production value from the Lithuanian locations. Excellent widescreen transfer. Extras include commentary and an interview with *Dungeons & Dragons* creator Gary Gygax.

Based on the Ray Bradbury story, *A Sound of Thunder* (2005) has what may be the longest production credits ever: Franchise Pictures Presents an Apollomedia - Qi Quality International - MFF (Sound of

Thunder) Limited Film Group 111 - Coco Co-Production in Association with Crusader Entertainment, A Scenario Lane/Jericho Production. The picture is not as good as it should have been, but it's not quite as terrible as it could have been. In 2055, time safaris to the past allow hunters to kill dinosaurs moments before they would have perished anyway. Though the team walks on pathways that allow them to interact with nothing else, one man crushes a butterfly which alters the future. (End of Bradbury story.) Time waves create more and more evolutionary chaos in the 21st Century as scientists (lead by Edward Burns) try to set things right. Way too much exposition in the first quarter, very uneven special effects, and a flat finale are the main problems with this otherwise creepy film. Excellent widescreen transfer; no extras.

Here's an interesting statistic to show how the multimedia world has changed over the past few years: *Smallville* seasons one - four have generated over \$100 million in revenue on the DVD sets alone.

On CD: Intrada has unearthed a couple of real gems. The first is a double CD set (in stereo) of Paul Sawtell's scores for Irwin Allen's *The Lost World* (1960) and *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1962). The first (co-written with Bert Shefter) is a bold, powerful, horn-heavy treat that makes it very clear when dinosaurs are on-screen. The different character melodies are distinctive and the jungle motifs are lush. (Now, if only someone would release the film on a widescreen DVD....) The second score is anchored by the catchy theme song. The rest ranges from delightfully soaring to frantic, exotic, jaunty and dangerous. A terrific collection.

The second must-have is Ronald Stein's growling, full-bodied score to the 1960 film *Dinosaur*. Reminiscent of Max Steiner and Bernard Hermann but with its own unique voice, the score evokes the rumbling menace of the revived Brontosaurus and Tyrannosaurus as they (and a cave-man) battle their way through the modern world. Excellent quality with a handsome illustrated booklet.

LUMOS 2005 THE WITCHING HOUR

by Jessica Ahearn

At an auction of Harry Potter-related items, a display of house ties were up for sale. The yellow and black one was displayed. A cheer of "Hufflepuff! Hufflepuff!" rose up from nowhere, girls screamed and waved their new "Badger Bitches" shirts in the air, and the stuffed weasel mascot did a dance. The Slytherins boomed. Only at The Witching Hour.

HP Education Fanon, who put on Lumos 2004 in Orlando, chose Salem, Massachusetts, for their October 2005 symposium, The Witching Hour. They explained "It is at this time—when the Harry Potter world has turned grey—that we need to look at our perceptions of morality, the choices we face, and the many paths that lie before us. What better place to conduct this exploration than Salem?" With its dark history, but current accepting attitude, it seemed the perfect place. Plus, the Salem Common makes a great Quidditch pitch.

Librarians, teachers, writers, fanfic authors, slashers, shippers, fanartists, cosplayers, and other assorted, mostly female, geeks gathered for the conference. While the author herself was not in attendance, many other literary stars came to speak. Amelia Atwater-Rhodes, Laurie R. King, Tamara Pierce, George Beahm, and Roxanne Conrad were there, as was Chris Rankin, who played Percy in the first three Harry Potter movies. The conference lasted four days and had about ten presentations an hour.

On Thursday, October 6th, conference-goers were greeted with a feast at the Great Hall by the Minister of Magic. The respective houses met their heads of house and got to mingle with their housemates. Then everyone went back to their hotels to get a good night's sleep for the next day's intense discussions.

Friday morning held lots of possibilities. The roundtable "Daddy I want to be a Death Eater: Character Studies Based on Nature versus Nurture" seemed a good pick, as did the theme panel "Pureblood Bigotry: A Backlash against Muggle Persecution? And does it matter?" At one presentation, someone asked, "We're allowed to talk about *Half-Blood Prince*, right?" Everyone just laughed. Most had read the 6th book—which came out three months before—at least twice. The presenter just said, "If you haven't read book 6, what are you doing here?"

That night was the kick-off of the Toil and Trouble tour. Teenage girls came out of the woodwork to see the opening act, Harry and the Potters, a local band of two young guys (Harry year 4 and Harry year 6.) They explain that the younger Harry was doing his homework one day when the older Harry walked over. The younger Harry exclaimed

"Hey, you're me, but older! Have you come to change my destiny?" The older Harry replied, "Nope! I'm on a mission of rock!" The band played crowd favorites like "The Godfather" and "Save Ginny Weasley." Some of the elders in the audience didn't really appreciate their new song about Professor Umbridge, which is mostly them yelling "Oh my God, you look like a frog!" over and over. The adults were just there for the main act, an eclectic group called The Weird Sisters, but after Harry and the Potters' last song, the crowd was informed The Weird Sisters couldn't make it, so they got The Weird Cousins instead. Oh well.

Saturday morning brought "Not an Ordinary Cut: A Discussion of Harry's Scar and Slughorn: Ambition, Cunning, but no Dark Mark," as well as the writing workshops and discussions on feminism and sexuality in Harry Potter that dominated the conference.

Saturday also featured the Quidditch tournament. The American Professional Quidditch League (formed just for the conference) hosted the event. Twelve teams sponsored by local businesses participated. Of course, it had started raining way before the Quidditch Breakfast, and the fields were soaked.

The game worked rather simply. Three hula hoops mounted on sticks were set up on each end of the field. The Quaffle—a small, hard ball—had to be thrown through any one of the hoops by the Chasers. The Keeper defended their hoops. The Beaters pushed around dodgeball Bludgers with their noif clubs to momentarily freeze opponents. And the Seeker had to catch the snitch, moved by the agile snitch movers. The movers held a ball wrapped in a handkerchief. The Seekers were to catch the cloth and then see if the ball was the one predetermined to be the "golden snitch." Simple.

By the tournament's final match, the mud was ankle-deep. The teams were sliding all over the place! But the match was quick, and the Fizzing Whizbees won. They were one of the few teams without reserve players, and the only all-girl team. The people from "How Hermione Granger brought Third Wave Feminism into the Wizarding World" would be proud.

That night was the premiere of *Sirius Black and the Secret Keeper*, the first ever fan film. A group of HP fans in Orlando created it early last year. The movie showed the

confrontation of Sirius with Peter Pettigrew, not directly described in the book. The movie was hilarious, and the special effects were great. Many in the audience were also impressed with the use of two real rats in the film. They were adorable in the outtakes, during which we saw how it was more luck than training that led to the final product.

Sunday, the final day of programming, held lots of fun discussions. One, "Introduction to Spell Writing," told how to cast publishers under your spell and get published with a few words. Debby Vigie claimed the trick was to describe your idea in a short, intriguing sentence that was hard to forget.

The Hallow'en Ball Sunday night offered a nice (albeit, quite Potter-less) last chance to party. Only Muggle attire was allowed, as the ball was held in the Peabody Essex Museum, which has a dress code. Many attendees, expecting HP movie soundtrack music but getting Sir Mix-A-Lot, left early. Before the ball was a presentation called "A Thinning of the Veil," which discussed the afterlife in Harry Potter. Some local mystics offered a creepy discussion that enthralled all but a few of us.

The Leaving Brunch on the 10th brought the conference to a close. Prize-winners were announced, the volunteer "elves" were given socks and freed, and the House Cup was awarded. The other houses clapped (well, one house booed) as they all received plastic "house cups" to drink out of.

Everyone left happier, and just a little Harry-er.



The champion Fizzing Whizbees. Author Jessica Ahearn is fourth from the left in the back row